

More from the 'theatre of promise'?

Or can South Africa's National Dialogue forge a real social compact?

By Bruce Kadalie



In the aftermath of the August National Dialogue, South Africans are sceptical, asking if this will once again descend into more 'political theatre,' but at the same time hopeful that this may prove to be the 'real thing' at last? Following an IFAA Forum titled 'South Africa's Social Compact: Can it be Achieved?' BRUCE KADALIE reflects on the elusive search for a binding national consensus in South Africa.



The timing of a recent Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) Forum titled “South Africa’s Social Compact: Can it be Achieved?” was not fortuitous. It took place during the runoff to President Cyril Ramaphosa’s flagship National Dialogue initiative – a grand political gambit born out of the fractured mandate of the 2024 elections that produced a Government of National Unity (GNU).

The National Dialogue, held in August 2025, was touted as the crucible for a new social compact, a foundational pact between state, capital, labour, and civil society to finally tackle the triple evils of poverty, inequality, and unemployment. Yet, as the IFAA discussion revealed, the path to this compact is littered with the wreckage of previous attempts, public cynicism, and a fundamental question of power: who truly gets to define the future of South Africa? The IFAA Forum brought together activists, scholars, and trade unionists who revealed a deep scepticism, and brought with them the ghost of past promises.

The dialogue was framed by IFAA’s Acting Director, Professor Emeritus, Ari Sitas, with a weary pragmatism that hung over the proceedings. He recalled the post-1994 hope about building consensus, but said, in reality “conflicts increased, tensions increased, divides increased”. This admission acknowledged that the machinery of social dialogue has, for more than three decades, failed to produce a consensus strong enough to alter the nation’s trajectory. Sitas framed the central dilemma around three issues: the *necessity* of a compact, the *methodology* of achieving it, and the *ultimate goal*.

He warned about the nation’s “diabolical ability to develop the most sophisticated policy papers and the diabolical ability to make them non-happenings.” This is the classic critique of South African governance: fluency in the language of policy coupled with a stunning deficit in implementation.

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Panellist Boichoko Ditlhake, the chairperson of the organising committee behind the National Dialogue, focused on citizen agency versus elite capture. He said the National Dialogue represents a historic fork in the road. “It will either serve as a true revival of social agency by citizens or become yet another instrument of elite-driven political theatre.” He pointed to the “fatigue” and “cynicism” among South Africans who have seen countless dialogues and compacts fail. “South Africa suffers from a deficit of implementing commitments,” he noted. “What guarantees this time will be different?”

Ditlhake’s critique echoes the Institute for Security Studies (ISS, 2024) which argued that the National Dialogue risks “putting the cart before the horse” and prioritising conversation over concrete, measurable outcomes. Without clear goals and mechanisms for accountability, the Dialogue could easily descend into “political theatre,” leaving the structural status quo untouched. Ditlhake argued the National Dialogue process must be “citizen-determined, not politically engineered,” involving “13,000 ward-based community dialogues” to reach over a million ordinary people.

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What would a genuine compact entail? Veteran trade unionist and IFAA board member, Tony Ehrenreich, brought the conversation down to the brass tacks of economic power and redistribution. His intervention was grounded in the unfulfilled promises of the Freedom Charter.

Ehrenreich dismantled the neoliberal logic that has dominated economic policy since the introduction of the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy in 1996. “Growth through redistribution is fundamental,” he asserted. “Without it, wealth won’t trickle down – unemployment will persist.”

For Ehrenreich, a compact is meaningless if it lacks enforceable mechanisms. He called for “sector-specific compacts with legal teeth” – memorandums of understanding (MOUs) on wages, training, and investment – that carry real penalties for non-compliance. “No more



President Cyril Ramaphosa addresses the National Dialogue, held at Unisa in August 2025. Photo from Flickr.

vague promises,” he said. He directly linked the failure of past compacts to a crisis of state credibility, noting how the political elite “assimilated apartheid-era extravagance instead of undoing inequality”.

The tension between these perspectives illustrates the core challenges of the National Dialogue. Dithlake’s focus on *agency* and Ehrenreich’s focus on *redistribution* are two sides of the same coin. Both are about power; the former is about political power – who gets a seat at the table – and the latter is about economic power – how the nation’s wealth is actually shared. A compact that addresses one without the other is doomed to fail.

This is not a uniquely South African dilemma. Lessons from Ireland’s system of social compacts suggests success hinges on rigorous accountability, routine assessments, and well-integrated institutional mechanisms (Gwaindepi, 2014). The Irish model worked, for a time, because it was underpinned by a clear *quid pro quo*: wage moderation in exchange for tax reforms and social investments. It was a binding deal, not a vague statement of intent.

South Africa’s efforts have consistently lacked this binding character, existing as “a work in progress” – a phrase from President Cyril Ramaphosa’s 2022 State of the Nation address, in which he spoke of the government’s intention to forge a comprehensive social compact but bemoaned the fact it had proved difficult to get off the ground. His



reference to it as a work in progress itself admits to a perpetual state of incompleteness (Parliament of RSA, 2022).

Signs of a collapse of the political consensus the GNU was meant to embody reinforces Sitas' urgent warning about the need to "minimise establishment power in these discussions" and ensure ordinary voices are heard over those of "corporations and politicians".

The IFAA Forum framed the contours of the problem. The path forward, as synthesised from the contributions of Sitas, Dithlake, and Ehrenreich, must be built on three pillars:

Institutionalised citizen power. Dithlake's model of granular, ward-level dialogues must be the non-negotiable foundation. This cannot be a rushed, tick-box exercise. It requires resources and a commitment to hearing uncomfortable truths. As a study from the South African Institute of International Affairs suggests, leveraging "participatory futures" methodologies to co-create "transformative ecosystems" is essential (SAIIA, 2025). This means moving beyond consultation to active co-design, empowering communities to shape the agenda itself.

Enforceable redistributive mechanisms. Ehrenreich's call for binding, sectoral MOUs is critical. The compact must be translated into specific, measurable commitments on jobs, wages, skills, and investment. These agreements need clear timelines, public dashboards for monitoring performance, and consequences for signatories who renege. This transforms the compact from a document into a dynamic, accountable contract.

An end to corruption and the lack of political credibility. There can be no compact without trust. Sitas' caution about "establishment power" must be heeded and individuals implicated in corruption and state capture cannot be allowed to lead or dominate this process. Their presence would poison the well from the outset. The compact needs oversight from a credible, cross-party body, perhaps chaired by a respected non-political figure, to ensure its integrity.

The National Dialogue and the quest for a social compact are critical and, above all, timeless. The obstacles are not technical; they are profoundly political. They are about a struggle over the soul of the nation's economy and the definition of its democracy. The IFAA Forum concluded on a cautious note of hope. Dithlake's final words hung in the digital air: "This is the moment to reclaim agency. If we don't, history will judge us harshly."



The National Dialogue may indeed be theatre, but it is necessary theatre – and it cannot remain just theatre. The stage is set. The audience – a weary, cynical, yet resilient nation – is watching. This time, the performance must be real. The promises must be binding. The ending, for once, must be rewritten.

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BIOGRAPHY

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