

The lines we dare not cross

 By [Andy du Plessis](#), issued by [FoodForward SA](#)

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The gross inequality across the length and breadth of South Africa is palpable, disturbing, and not sustainable for long term growth, national security, and social cohesion. Moreover, occurrences such as pandemics and natural disasters affect the poor the worst, leaving many people vulnerable, exposed, anxious, and desperate.



Image source: unequalscenes.com Johnny Miller

Nearly 30 years into our democracy, millions of people are still forced to live in densely populated, unsafe, make-shift informal dwellings, which are predisposed to cold, wind, rain and fires, trying to carve out a livelihood at the fringes. Still others live in clustered low-cost housing. These environments come with several challenges and set-backs – gangsterism, drugs, crime, prostitution, extortion etc.

People living in chronic poverty have no collective voice in the corridors of power, they have limited safety nets, and are every so often at the mercy of the unscrupulous. They have limited access to economic opportunities and mobility, and most are not able to escape their surroundings because of this multi-generational poverty trap. They are ignored, overlooked, abused, or simply made to feel insignificant and invisible. Unless one has lived in this environment, it is extremely difficult to accurately imagine what it is like living as a poor person in South Africa.

Generally, people that live in affluent suburbs tend to steer clear of 'townships' because they are taught or cautioned (and in some cases justifiably so), that 'townships' are unsafe, unpredictable, and difficult to navigate. Ironically, as in the case of many urban and rural communities in South Africa, the divide between the rich and poor is often simply a road or railway line, but since they are on opposite ends of the economic divide, the general infrastructure, service delivery, amenities, security, built environment etc. are vastly different.

While this is a generalisation and without any scientific basis at all, I think that many privileged South Africans have/may never ever visit a 'township' in their entire lifetime – and they are the poorer for it (excuse the pun).

Not being able to visibly see how 'the other half' live does give one an incomplete/skewed picture of the starkness of poverty, and the daily suffering and struggle – living with no running water or having to collect water in a bucket at a nearby supply line; having to heat up the water; sharing communal pit latrines; trying to study by candlelight; cooking with paraffin; enduring the bitter cold in winter and the extreme heat in summer; sharing and sleeping in a single room with 8 or 10

people; having limited or no food, clothing, or hygiene options; surviving on social grants to get by; travelling far distances to get to work or to look for work, and living with the indignity and shame; to name a few descriptive scenarios.

Just thinking about living in such circumstances is uncomfortable, unbearable, and unimaginable. It's easier not to think or talk about it. Yet, this is the daily lived experience of far too many marginalised people and communities in our country.

With this context in mind, it's not difficult to understand why we have thousands of service delivery protests each year, why we are seeing an increase in opportunistic theft and other crimes, and why riots, like we witnessed in Durban in July 2021, is an attractive option for those who are dispossessed, desperate, and nothing to lose.

As a result of the work we do at FoodForward SA, we get to see the unattractive face of endemic poverty which is visible in under-served communities, and how our work is making a meaningful difference. I recently visited affected communities in KZN following the devastating floods, and I was again reminded of just how vulnerable poor communities are, and how important it is to continue the work we do, so that people living in under-served communities have the opportunity to improve their lives and livelihoods.

Much of the current challenge we face as a country is the result of many years of apartheid, leading to gross inequality and racial division, coupled with our current challenges of unemployment, a weak economy, corruption, low levels of education, etc. We must all dedicate our time and resources to meaningfully narrow the inequality gap and work towards a more inclusive society.

ABOUT ANDY DU PLESSIS

Andy du Plessis is a food justice activist and has been involved in the development sector for nearly 30 years. He is currently the managing director of FoodForward SA, which he joined in 2013.

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