

THE CASE FOR A SOLIDARITY TAX

A one-off tax, as controversial as it may be, needn't mean that those who've been left behind can just sit back and relax

I was giving a lecture recently on why we should care about social justice when someone in the audience asked: "Why not introduce a solidarity tax, even if it is a one-off deal?"

Her argument was that a solidarity tax would help address the socioeconomic legacy of the racially unjust laws of the past. Manifestations of the legacy include inequality in education, digital parity and access to infra-

structure. Someone else immediately dismissed the idea. He said it would simply be a wealth tax in disguise – and a wealth tax was unsustainable and discouraged investors. And, he added, why should citizens be responsible for plugging the gap left by corruption and ineptitude?

Now, there are many executives and economists

who oppose any kind of tax-based solution to equality, but I said a solidarity tax was a great idea.

The way I see it, this would help to accelerate our push for parity in areas like education.

It is a violation of the imperative for constitutional equality that so many children in rural areas have to attend schools with no science

or computer labs, do not have toilets at their schools and have been frozen out of development so they can serve as a perpetual labour reserve.

For these children, it's clear the constitutional commitment to heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and human rights has been betrayed. These children live without electricity or running water, while their peers can focus on getting an education.

In a previous column in the FM, I wrote of how Harvard University's Prof Fernando Reimers and US community organiser Keith Errol Benson argue that if we want economies to grow sustainably while insulating our democracies, we need to *invest* in peace.

This should surprise no-one. Ancient societies, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas, needed no lectures about the value of human solidarity, which underpins the philosophy of ubuntu – "I am because we are".

At the core of ubuntu is an appreciation of why we need to invest in each other.

In my lecture, I made it clear that I was not advocating for communities that have been unfairly left behind to simply sit back and wait for the government or the corporate sector to rescue them. Both sides must act, I said.

To illustrate my point, I told the story of Amanda, a participant in the Kilimanjaro Trek4Mandela Caring4Girls initiative, the aim of which was to raise funds to provide girls with sanitary pads and empower them as leaders. We were an all-women squad, except for one American and the expedition leader, Sibusiso Vilane, whose expeditions

have yielded millions of sanitary pads for disadvantaged girls.

On the way to our starting point to summit on Mandela Day, July 18, Amanda was accidentally left behind at a garage where our bus had stopped.

What would you do if you were left behind at a strange garage in a foreign country?

Well, as our bus hurtled back to fetch her, we passed Amanda riding on the back of a stranger's motorcycle. Amanda's response had been to hire a motorcycle taxi – the Uber of East and West Africa.

There are, I believe, three lessons to learn from the Amanda incident that can help us think about how to rebuild after Covid.

The first, obviously, is "leave no one behind". And the second is that when this does happen, it is our duty and in our interest to go back and try to get them on board.

The third lesson is that those left behind shouldn't assume someone is coming back for them. They'd better pull themselves up by their bootstraps. At my foundation, Thuma, this is called the Siyazakhela Enterprising Communities way.

I see elements of all these strands in the Solidarity Fund – set up to help SA survive the pandemic – in the way business has tried to support those hit by the unrest in July, and in the way some companies are looking for ways to adapt to the lockdown and other lifequakes.

In this sense, many are *already* showing their solidarity. So would social justice and rebuilding the country be helped by a solidarity tax? Well, you be the judge. ✕
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