

# The harm of Essop's fables

WITH Beijing's political baggage presumably packed away, and the mega-event focus shifting to SA, a rip has appeared in the weave of multicultural post-apartheid identity.

In Beijing to promote the World Cup, SA's Minister in the Presidency Essop Pahad, a member of the board of the 2010 World Cup Organising Committee, was recently reported as saying, "Even though they are a minority, there are still a lot of whites who don't support Bafana Bafana." In addition, he reportedly said: "They (whites) also don't care that the World Cup is being staged in SA".

These are incendiary words and have, understandably, engendered much controversy. For a prominent member of government who is tasked with ensuring a successful event, trading in stereotypes can undermine international confidence and, more importantly, efforts to promote national unity and social cohesion.

Responses to Pahad have questioned the veracity of his statements. Ian Davidson, the DA chief whip, castigated him: "There is simply no evidence to suggest that any group of South Africans is against staging the 2010 Soccer World Cup in SA".

One columnist asked, "Is there any scientific evidence to support Pahad's claims?"

In fact, the Human Sciences Research Council's (HSRC's) annual, nationally representative, longitudinal survey provides insight into the attitudes of all South Africans towards the 2010 World Cup and sport and recreation in general. The survey suggests that, like other population groups, white South Africans do indeed care about the World Cup.

What is caring and how does one measure it? Implicit in the notion of care are elements of concern, worry and even trouble, but also pride and anticipation. Over the past three years, at least 95% of white South Africans (aged 16 years and older) have consistently perceived there to be some form of benefit accruing to SA from the hosting of the World Cup. These benefits



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are seen mostly to be in the form of economic growth, job creation, putting SA on the map and increased tourism.

In citing such benefits, white South Africans do not differ appreciably from other population groups, although they do have significantly higher expectations of tourism benefits than do black South Africans. Also, while all South Africans share high expectations of the other three perceived benefits, their relative ranking varies.

If one examines attitudes to the likely legacy of 2010, it appears that white South Africans do not differ substantially from Indian and coloured South Africans (though coloured South Africans are somewhat more ambivalent) in their view that benefits will be transitory in nature.

Black respondents (at 55% last year) however, are the most optimistic about the lasting effect of the World Cup, exceeding white respondents by 18 percentage points. This does not negate the nearly universal view that the World Cup will bring benefits to SA.

On the issue of readiness, white South Africans do appear to be more sceptical than Indian and coloured South Africans and significantly more so than black South Africans. Although white respondents are relatively more concerned that the country will be ready to host the World Cup in 2010, this by no means implies that they care less about hosting the mega-event. Rather than signifying

indifference, their concern could be interpreted as a sign of caring that the country is presented in the best possible light.

Moreover, almost eight out of 10 white South Africans believe in the unifying power of sport. Indeed, all population groups hold similar sentiments that sport brings different groups and races inside SA closer together. All are likewise very proud when SA performs well at international sporting competitions — 88% of white, 85% of Indian, 83% of coloured and 80% of black respondents are of this opinion.

The issue then is not one of race but one of performance. Fans are quick to desert underperforming teams. Witness the outrage over the recent South African Olympic, rugby and cricket performances.

Support is not guaranteed, it is earned. When Bafana Bafana starts performing, its support base will increase — across all population groups.

Social cohesion in SA is fragile. The recent xenophobic attacks across the country have starkly highlighted the tenuous nature of social inclusion. The leaders of our 2010 endeavour have a responsibility to ensure that their messaging is articulate, instils confidence and positions the mega-event as a fillip to inspire progress towards a unified society.

White South Africans — like others — care about the World Cup. To suggest otherwise undermines the very commonalities that should be promoted.

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