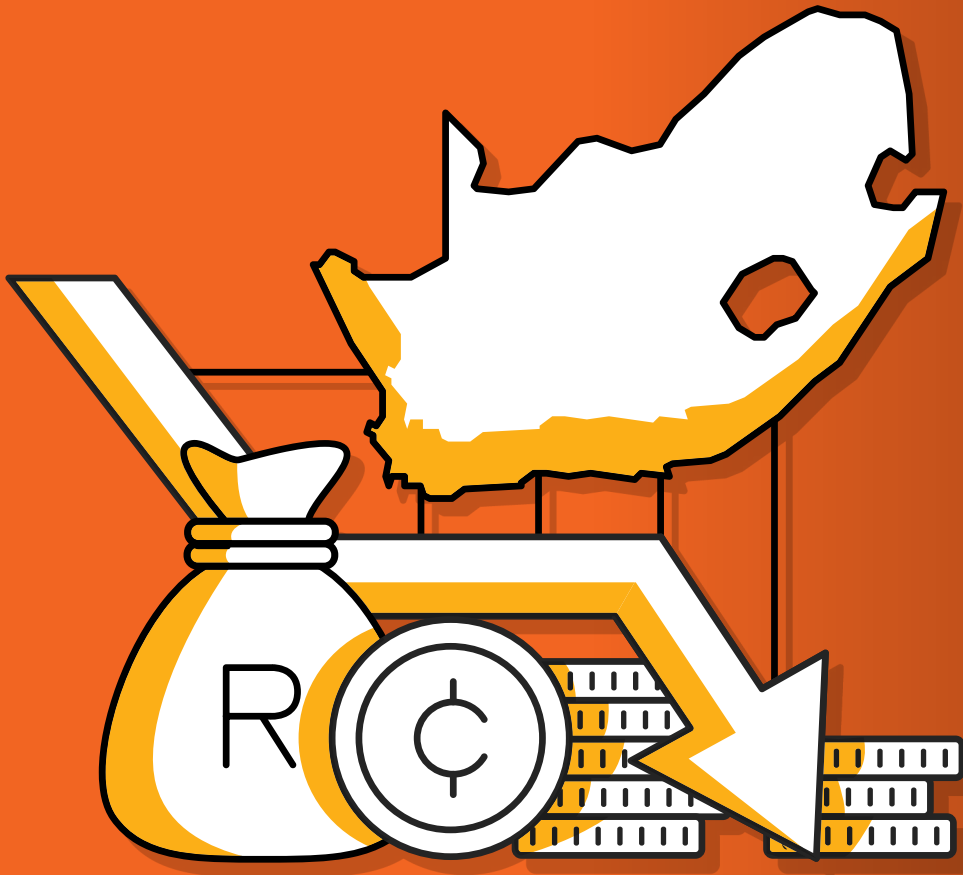


BRIEF **1**



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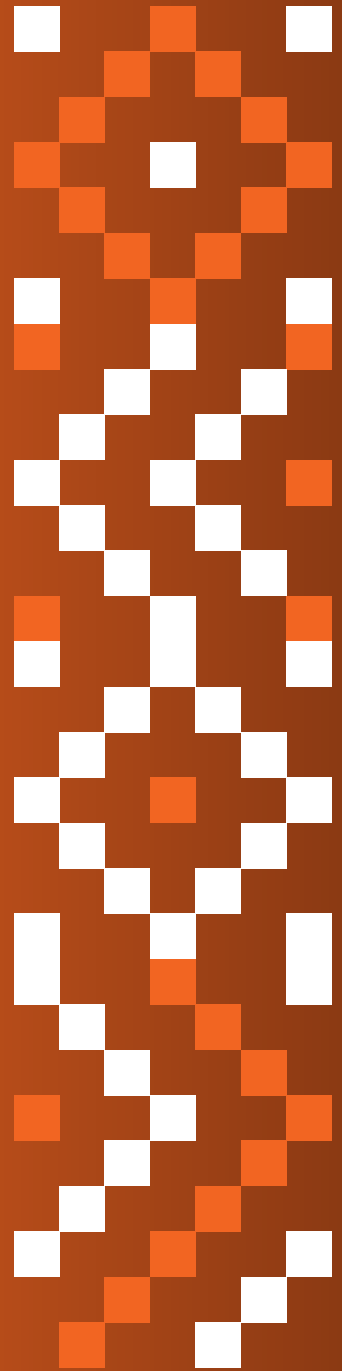
CENTRE FOR  
SOCIAL CHANGE



# Shifting the narrative about human rights and the economy

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The public's views on the economy



The Future Reimagined

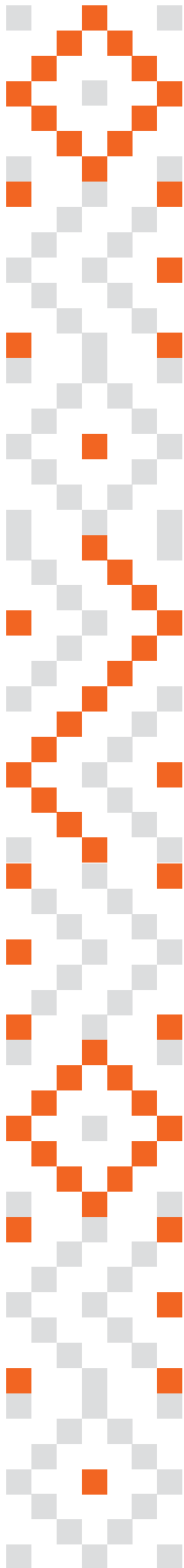
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## Introduction

Shifting the Narrative about Human Rights and the Economy is a joint project between the Fight Inequality Alliance (FIA), the Centre for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) and the Centre for Social Change (CSC). Guidance was also provided by the Frameworks Institute. This project is supported by a grant from the Open Society Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, narrative change projects have been an effective method of challenging dominant ideas in society in favour of more progressive ideas.

The organisations involved in the Shifting the Narrative project share a common perspective on the socially and environmentally destructive nature of neoliberal economic policies across the world, and in South Africa in particular. The goal of this project is to identify counter-hegemonic narratives to contest neoliberal discourse and engage in the 'battle for ideas' over how best to run our societies.

To engage in this type of activist and advocacy work, we first ought to map the existing landscape. In other words, we wanted to build a picture of how economic issues are already being discussed and debated in public and activists spheres.

Our research agenda took three angles; 1) to understand the social attitudes of the South African public to issues about the economy and economic justice; 2) to develop a picture of the debates on the economy that take place in the mainstream media and 3) to reflect on what activists have to say about rights-based campaigns for social justice and our overall reflections on what the research has to tell us about narrative change.

**This brief focuses on the social attitudes** of the South African public to issues about the economy and economic justice.

It is divided into two sections. The first section examines data gathered from various social attitudes surveys. These include the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), the University of Johannesburg/Humans Sciences Research Council (UJ/HSRC) COVID-19 Democracy Survey and Afrobarometer. The second presents data from an online survey the research team developed to further probe what the public think about the economy and activist demands around the economy.

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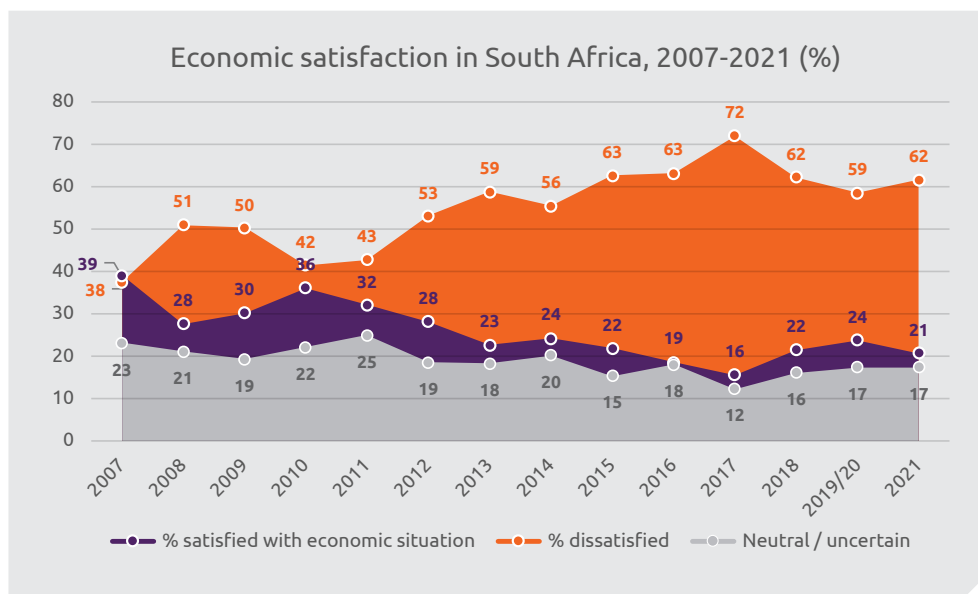
<sup>1</sup> The findings and views expressed in this report are those of the authors only.

## The public's views on the economy

This section of the brief details what the public think about the economy, inequality and taxation.

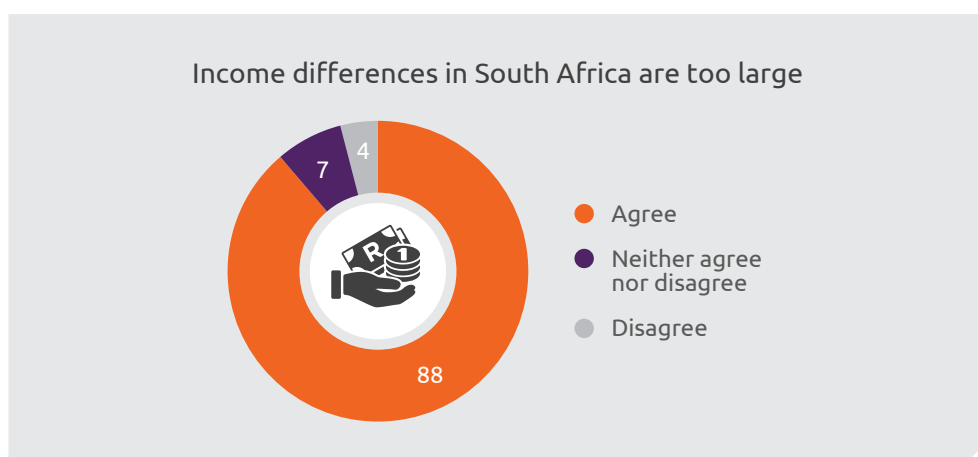
### Satisfaction with the economic situation

Dissatisfaction with South Africa's economic situation has risen considerably in the last decade. In 2011, 43% said they were dissatisfied with the economic situation. In 2021, this rose to nearly two thirds (62%), saying they were dissatisfied with the economic situation.



(Source: SASAS 2002-2021)

### Public views on inequality

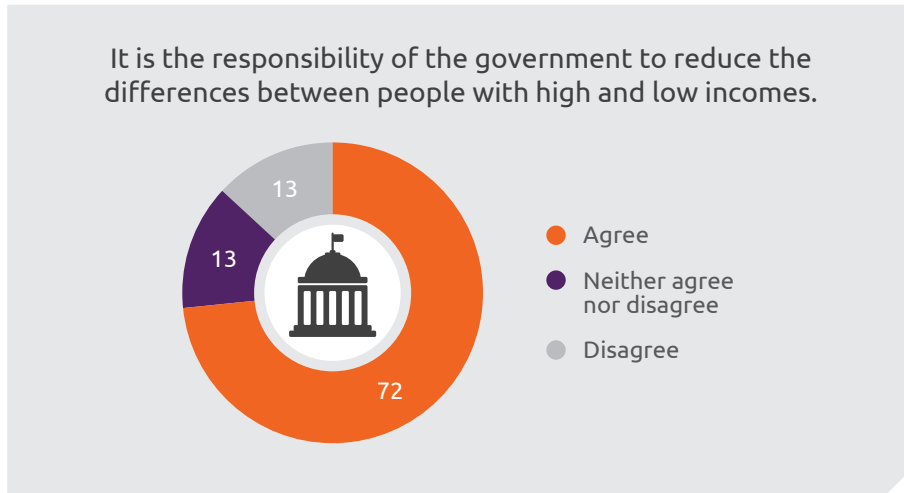


(Source: SASAS 2017)

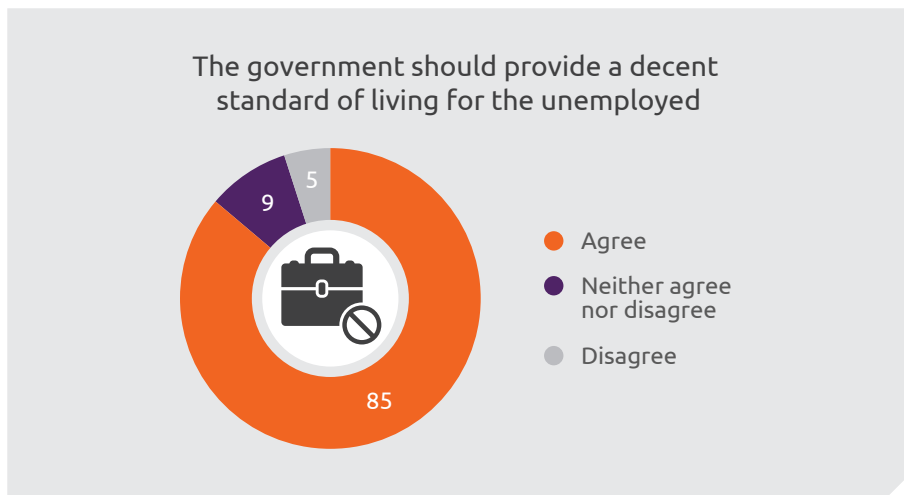
The vast majority (88%) of the South African public agree that income inequality is too large.

## The role of the state in the economy

The public shows a clear preference for the state to intervene in the economy. 72% agree that it is the responsibility of the government to reduce income inequality and 85% agree that the government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed.



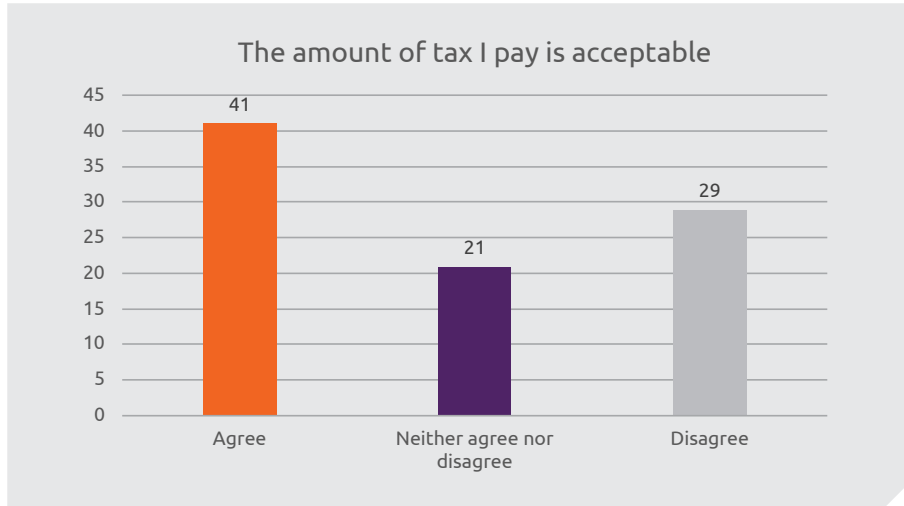
(Source: SASAS 2017)



(Source: SASAS 2017)

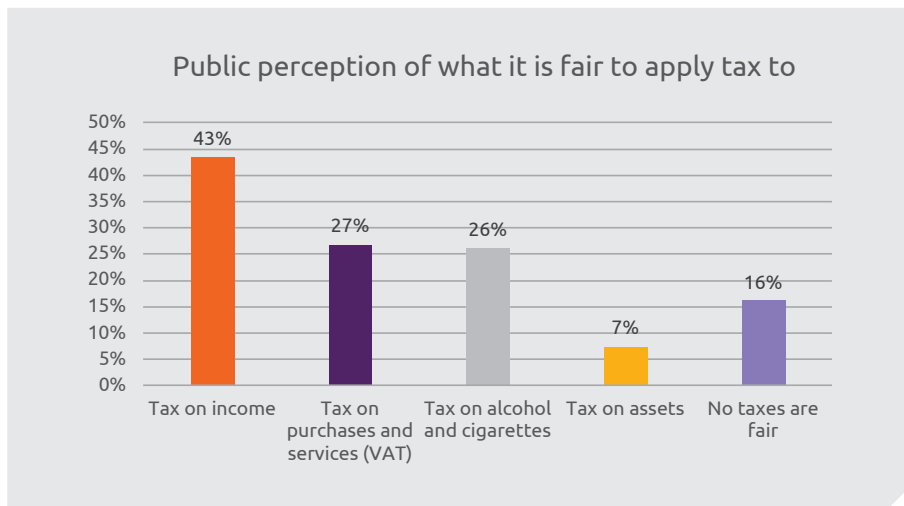
## The Public's Views on Taxation

About 4 in 10 people say that the amount of tax they pay is acceptable. 3 in 10 people say that the amount of tax they pay is not acceptable.



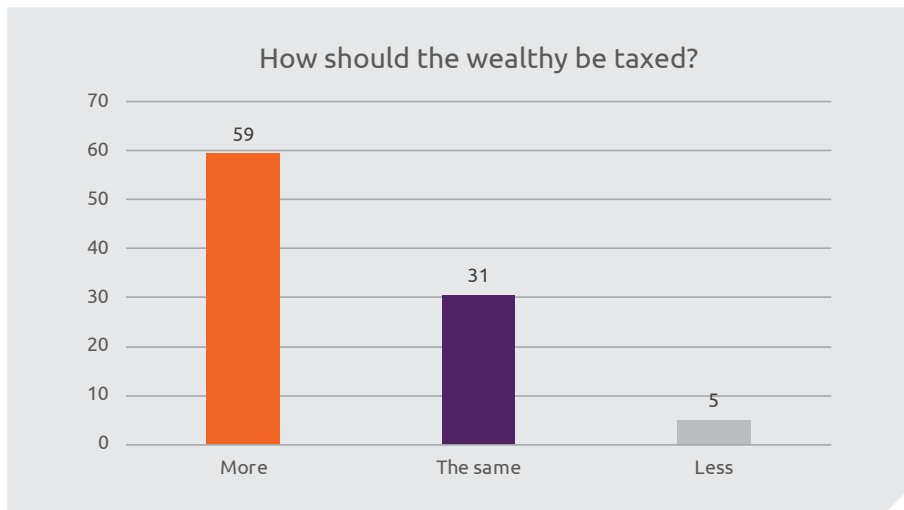
(Source: SASAS 2017)

When people are asked about what they think it is fair to apply tax to, most (43%) believe it is fair to apply tax to income. About a quarter (1 in 4 people) think that VAT and tax on alcohol and cigarettes are fair. But very few people (7%) consider it as fair to tax assets. Only 16% of the population say no taxes are fair.



(Source: SASAS 2017)

## Taxation and redistribution

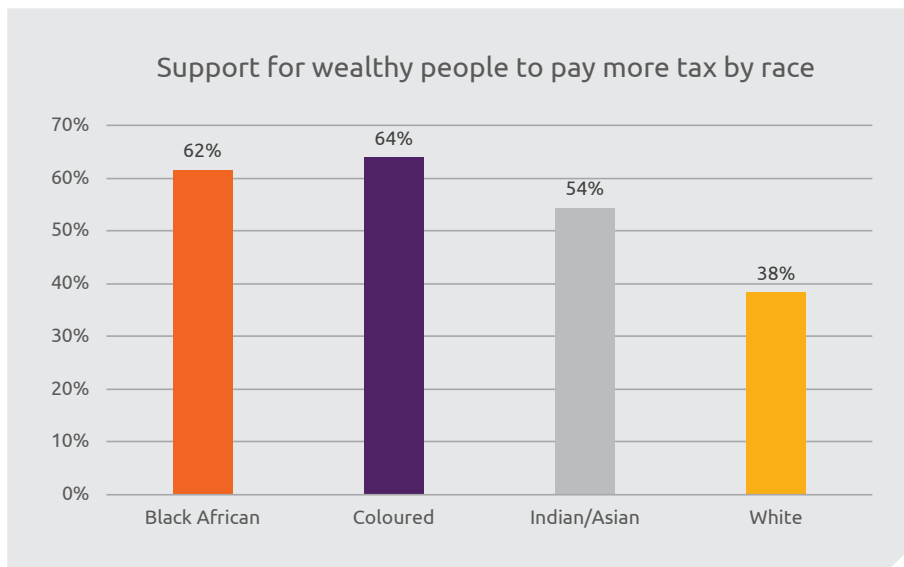


(Source: SASAS 2017)

As we saw above, there is a strong belief that inequality is too high and that the government should intervene in inequality. When asked if they believe that people with higher incomes should be taxed more, 59% agreed that wealthy people should pay more and 31% said it should remain the same. Very few people said that they thought that rich people should pay less tax.

However, as we may expect, views on the issue differed by race and by income.

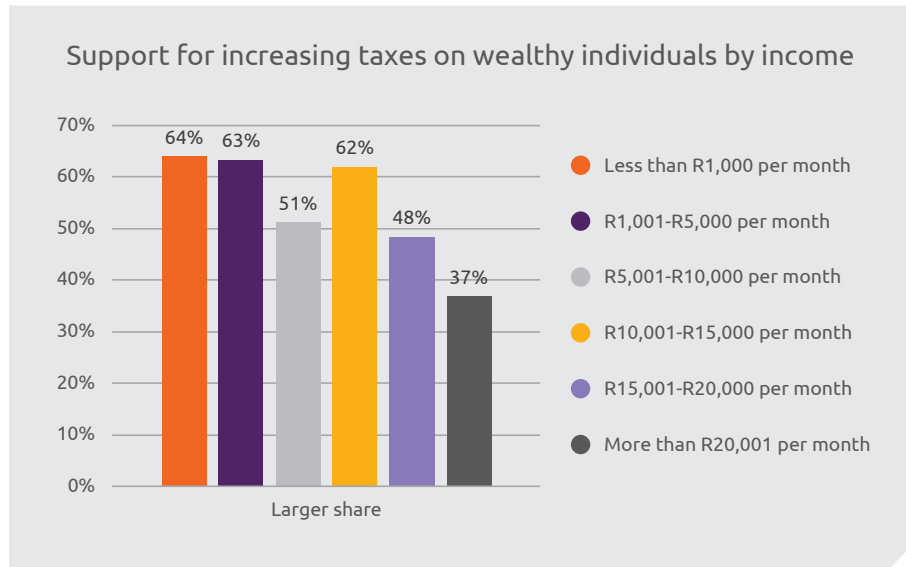
Black African, Coloured and Indian adults more strongly favoured increasing taxes on wealthy individuals compared to White adults. Most White adults favoured the level of taxes remaining the same.



(Source: SASAS 2017)



As we may expect, wealthier individuals, those earning over R20,000 per month, were less in favour of paying more taxes. However, 6 in 10 people earning under R5,000 per month support the wealthy paying more taxes.



(Source: SASAS 2017)

## Policy priorities

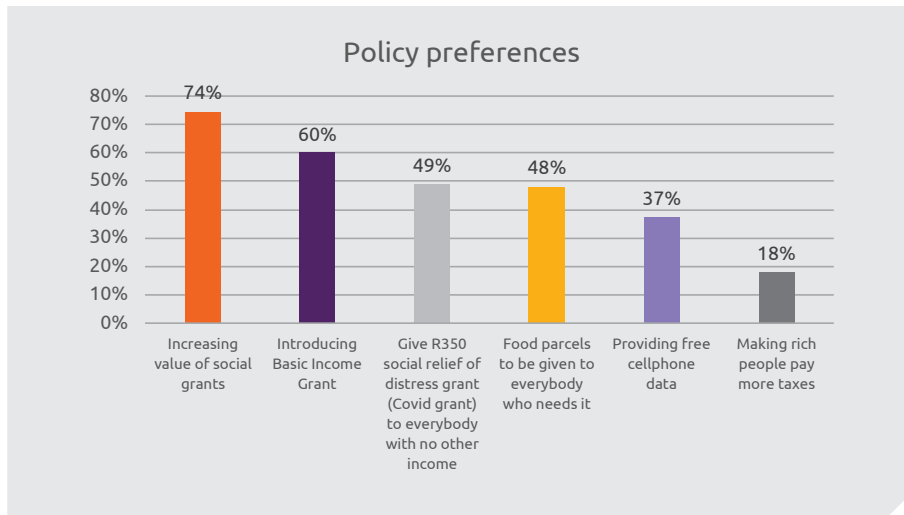
As we've seen from the above, there is a strong belief that there is too much inequality in South Africa and that the government is responsible for reducing inequality. Most agree that the government should do more to help the unemployed, in particular, and there is support for those with larger incomes to be taxed more. However, what kind of policy interventions do South Africans prioritise?

As part of the UJ/HSRC COVID-19 Democracy survey, a cross-sectional online survey conducted between 2020 and 2021, people were asked to indicate what policy measures they would support from a list of possible options. People could select more than one option.

As we would expect, based on the findings above, there was strong support for increasing the value of social grants (74%) and introducing a basic income grant (60%). About half of the population support providing the social relief of distress grant and providing food parcels to those in need.

But, only 18%, about 2 in every 10 people, support making rich people pay more taxes. This would seem to contradict what we saw above, where 59% indicated that they thought those with higher incomes should pay more tax.

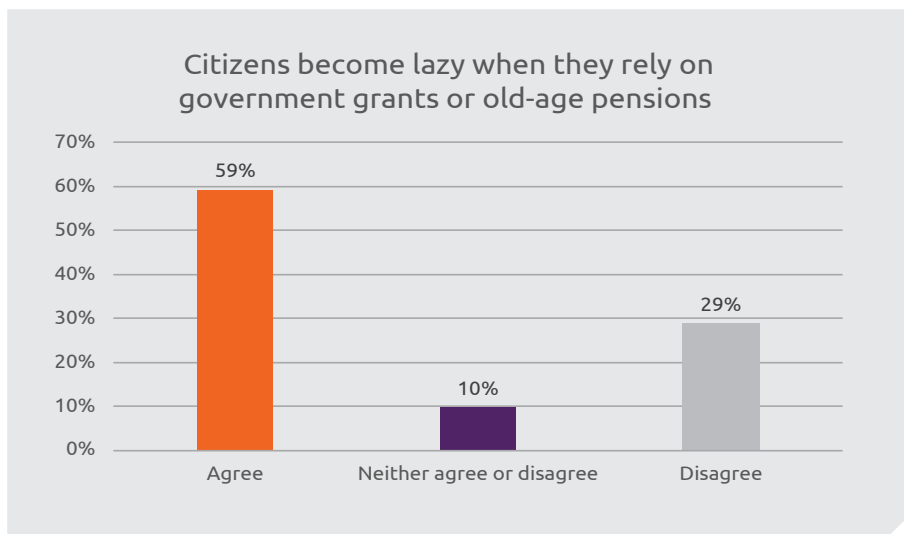
How might we understand these contradictory findings? One explanation could be that although people support taxing rich people more, it is not a policy they want to prioritise. Instead, they would rather prioritise increasing the value of social grants and the introduction of the basic income grant.



(Source: UJ/HSRC COVID-19 Democracy Survey 2020-2021 R1-R5)

### Contradictory views on social grants

Despite the strong support for social grants, there is also a strong belief that being a grant recipient makes you 'lazy'. 59% agree that citizens become lazy when they rely on government grants or old-age pensions.



(Source: Afrobarometer 2018)

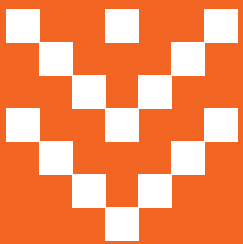
## What can we learn from social attitudes data about the economy?

Many of the findings above may confirm what we think about the economy and economic justice. The data shows that,

- There is a strong belief that the level of inequality is too high across all sections of South African society.
- There is strong support for the basic income grant **but** also a widespread perception that grants make people lazy.
- There is strong support for increasing taxes on wealthy people **but** it is not a policy that most people prioritise.
- More people support increasing taxes on wages and VAT than they do on increasing taxes on assets.

The contradictions between the public's support for progressive policy interventions, like a basic income grant, versus the widespread negative perceptions they hold about grant recipients may highlight some important areas for narrative change.

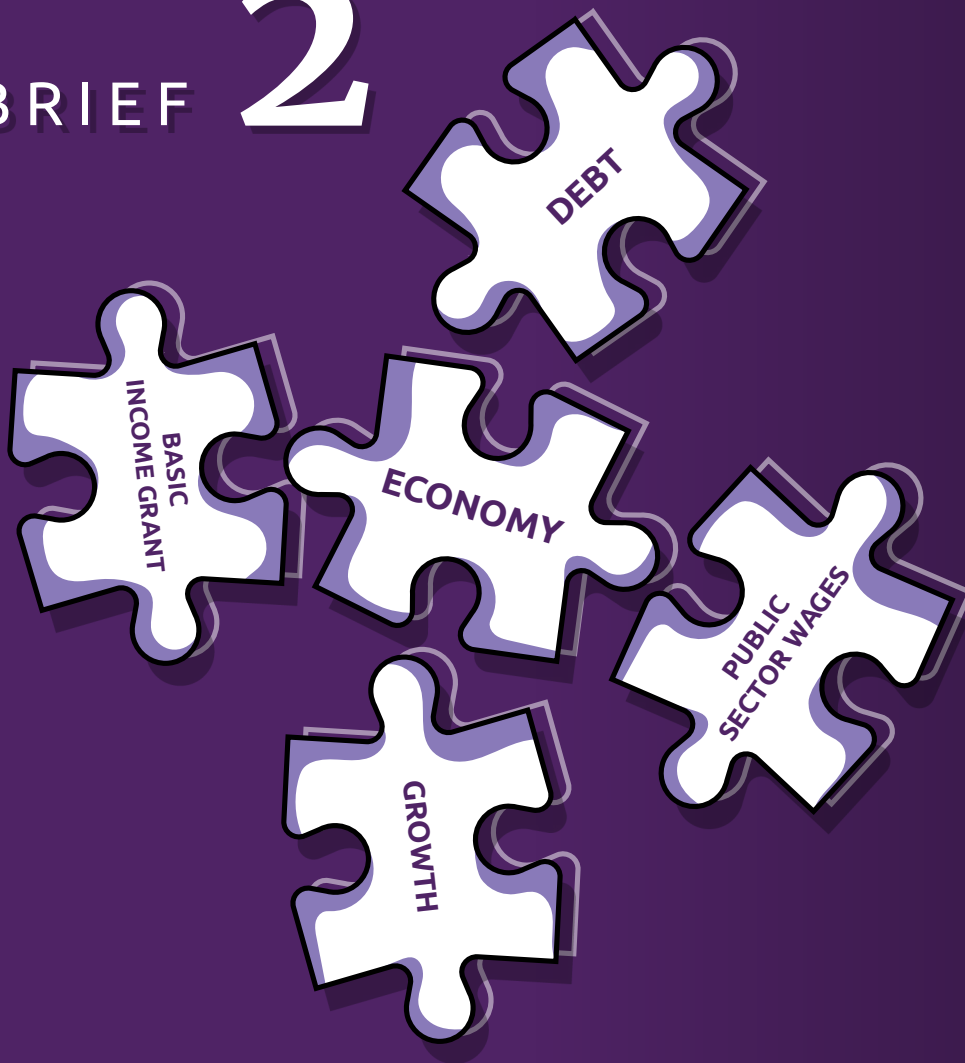
Furthermore, this data also highlights areas for narrative change around tax. Most of the public support taxes on income and VAT but not assets. Increasing taxes on income and VAT would hit the poor the hardest, while increasing taxes on assets would only impact the rich. However, it may be that the idea of an asset is not well understood in society.



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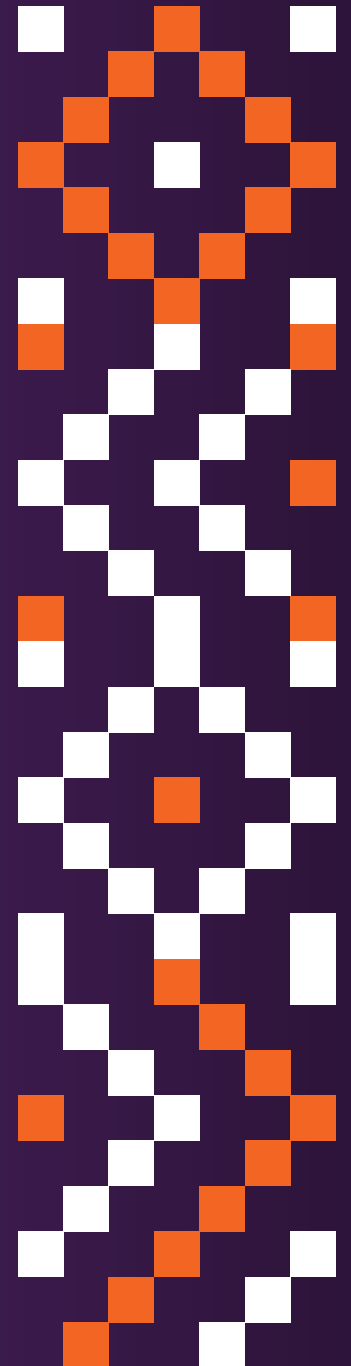
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# BRIEF 2



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## Shifting the narrative about human rights and the economy

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Media analysis of the basic income grant and the public sector wage bill

The Future  
Reimagined

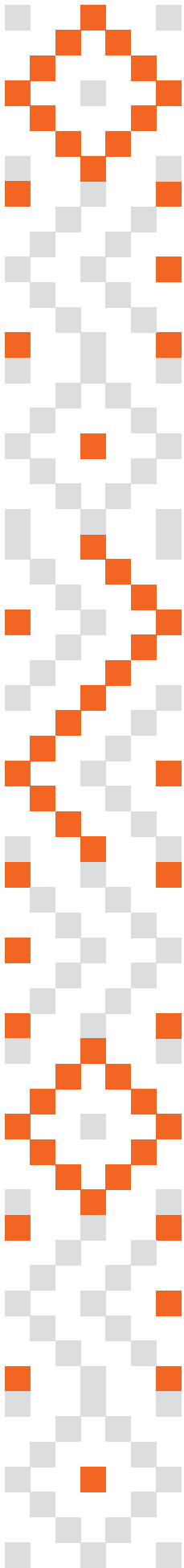
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Questions for narrative change and the basic income grant .....	10
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## Introduction

Shifting the Narrative about Human Rights and the Economy is a joint project between the Fight Inequality Alliance (FIA), the Centre for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) and the Centre for Social Change (CSC). Guidance was also provided by the Frameworks Institute. This project is supported by a grant from the Open Society Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, narrative change projects have been an effective method of challenging dominant ideas in society in favour of more progressive ideas.

The organisations involved in the Shifting the Narrative project share a common perspective on the socially and environmentally destructive nature of neoliberal economic policies across the world, and in South Africa in particular. This project aims to identify counter-hegemonic narratives to contest neoliberal discourse and engage in the ‘battle for ideas’ over how best to run our societies.

To engage in this type of activist and advocacy work, we first ought to map the existing landscape. In other words, we wanted to build a picture of how economic issues are already being discussed and debated in public and activist spheres.

Our research agenda took three angles; 1) to understand the social attitudes of the South African public to issues about the economy and economic justice; 2) to develop a picture of the debates on the economy that take place in the mainstream media and 3) to reflect on what activists have to say about rights-based campaigns for social justice and our overall reflections on what the research has to tell us about narrative change.

**This brief focuses on the media analysis component.** To run this analysis, we found it useful to isolate two case studies that get to the heart of the debates on the economy, how it should function, and, crucially, on the state’s role in managing the economy through policy and other interventions. The two case studies are 1) the basic income grant and 2) the public sector wage bill.

The decision to focus on these two case studies was based on two factors: 1) the prevalence of the debates around these themes in the media in recent years, and 2) the nature of the debates and the insights they offer into the power of narrative interventions in influencing the state’s socio-economic policy agendas.

The two case studies provide insight into how neoliberal logics establish themselves as dominant through the mainstream media and show how they are contested. The basic income grant and public sector wage bill debates are part of a much broader debate on how we organise our society and the state’s role in (a) managing the economy and (b) redistributing resources.

This research brief is organised as follows:

- A brief description of our research approach.
- Case study 1: The basic income grant.
  - ▶ A contextual introduction to the basic income grant.
  - ▶ The main findings of the media analysis of the basic income grant.
  - ▶ Reflection on the findings and four questions that arise from this research that could be important to informing narrative change.
- Case study 2: The public sector wage bill.
  - ▶ A contextual introduction to the public sector wage bill.
  - ▶ The main findings of the media analysis of the public sector wage bill.
  - ▶ Reflection on the findings and four questions that arise from this research that could be important to informing narrative change.
- Concluding reflections on the lessons for narrative change.

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<sup>1</sup> The findings and views expressed in this report are those of the authors only.



## Approach to the media analysis

Our first goal was to establish how the debate over the basic income grant and public sector wage bill has taken place in the media over the last year. To achieve this, we asked the following questions:

1. Who are the commentators (organisations and individuals) that are engaging in the basic income grant and in the wage bill debates?
2. How frequently does each commentator appear in each sample?
3. What arguments or narratives are employed to advance different positions on the basic income grant and on the wage bill?
4. How frequently does each argument or narrative appear in the sample?
5. How do these narratives operate within overarching discourses to advance a view on how our economies should be run?

To answer these questions, we used a combination of **content analysis** and **discourse analysis**.

**Content analysis** allows us to see how frequently certain commentators or institutions and the arguments or narratives that they employ come up in our media sample. This offers an overall sense of how the debate on the basic income grant is unfolding.

**Discourse analysis** allows us to explore how narratives and arguments operate as patterns within much broader discourses. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an approach that encourages an investigation into how discourses are linked to ideologies (specific world views on how society is and should be run). CDA allows us to see how discourses influence how real-world developments are interpreted but it also allows us to assess how such discursive frameworks act on the real world to influence how we construct our societies – in this case through the influence that discourses have on social attitudes and government policy.

More detail on how we conducted the research can be found in the appendix to this brief.

## Case study 1. The Basic Income Grant – An idea whose time has come?

The idea of some form of basic income support or universal grants coverage has been on the agenda in South Africa for at least two decades. In 2002, Professor Vivienne Taylor presented the *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive System of Social Security for South Africa* to the Minister of Social Development. The “Taylor Report”, as it became known, called for a redesign of the “existing piecemeal and fragmented” social security system “to address, in a coherent and phased way, the constitutional and democratic imperatives as well as the socio-economic challenges facing South Africa”.<sup>2</sup>

Since then, a small section of civil society has advocated for the implementation of the Taylor Report’s recommendations and emphasised the demand for a basic income grant. The hardship caused or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic has now put these demands at the centre of public debates on how to address the deepening socio-economic crisis facing the country.

High unemployment is clearly a permanent feature of the South African economy and not merely a passing phenomenon. As this reality becomes ever more unarguable, the pressure mounts on the state to expand the grants framework. Simultaneously, as free public services fall into disrepair or are privatised, so the need for money in people’s pockets increases. It is these concrete structural conditions that lay the basis for sustained activist and advocacy campaigns to shift the narrative of the role of the state in securing livelihoods and, ultimately, on its role in managing the economy.

The next section of the brief presents the main findings of the media analysis over the basic income grant. What is clear is that advocacy work has shifted the debate in the media and in some cases contested the narratives associated with neoliberal economic orthodoxy. The findings of this research, therefore, provide useful lessons for future narrative change efforts.

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor, V. et al. (2002). *Transforming the Present, Protecting the Future: Report of the Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive System of Social Security for South Africa*, Department of Social Development. pp: x.

## How is the basic income grant discussed in the media?

The idea of a basic income grant is talked about in three main ways in the media.

The most common way is to discuss the basic income grant in relation to its potential negative effects on the economy. We call these **conservative economic narratives** (see table 1).

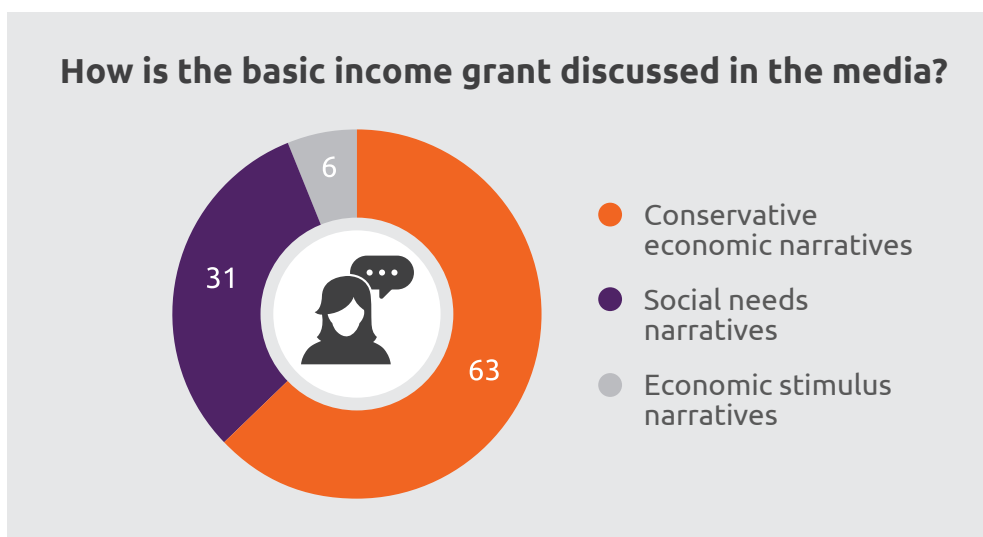
Another way that the basic income grant is talked about is in relation to the potential positive effects that it will have on addressing social issues such as poverty and inequality. We call these **social needs narratives**.

Finally, in some cases the basic income grant is being spoken about as a potential stimulus to the economy. We call these **economic stimulus narratives**.

Conservative economic narratives dominate in the media landscape.

**Table 1: Narratives about a basic income grant**

<b>Conservative economic narratives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ BIG is not affordable</li> <li>▪ Resources do not exist for BIG</li> <li>▪ Concern about increasing government debt</li> <li>▪ BIG will come at the expense of job creation, services, infrastructure investment etc.</li> <li>▪ BIG will impede economic growth</li> <li>▪ BIG will promote dependency culture</li> </ul>
<b>Social needs narratives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Intervention required to address poverty and inequality</li> <li>▪ Urgent need for BIG.</li> <li>▪ BIG needed to promote social cohesion and/or prevent unrest</li> <li>▪ COVID-19 has made BIG essential</li> <li>▪ Critique of social impact of government austerity</li> <li>▪ BIG required to address human rights</li> </ul>
<b>Economic stimulus narratives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Grants needed to promote participation in the economy</li> <li>▪ BIG will increase economic growth or stimulate economy</li> </ul>



## How is the potential implementation of a basic income grant being debated?

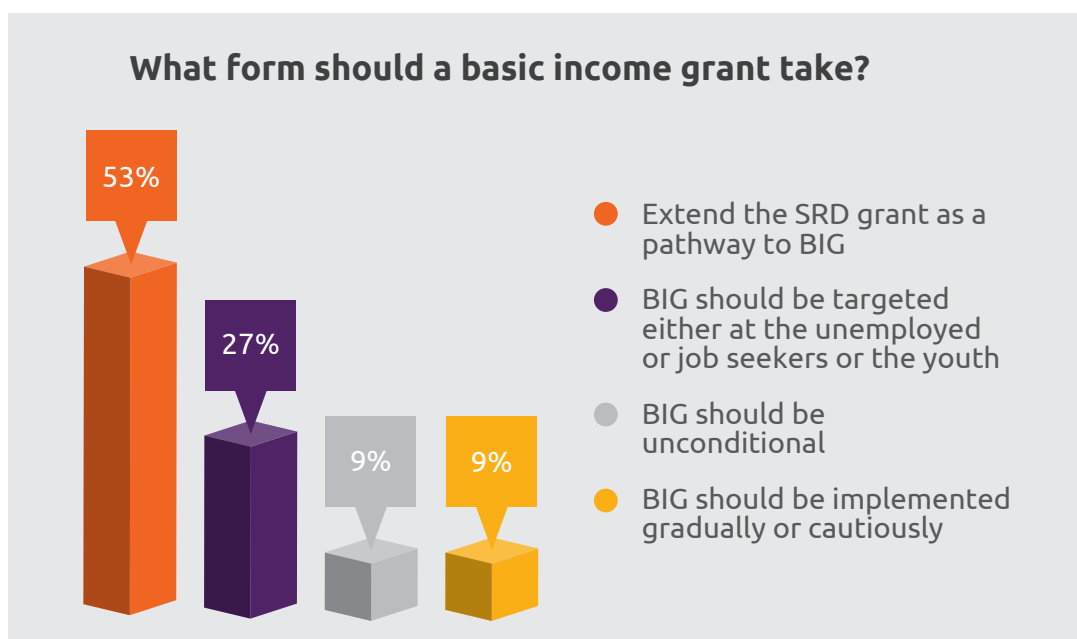
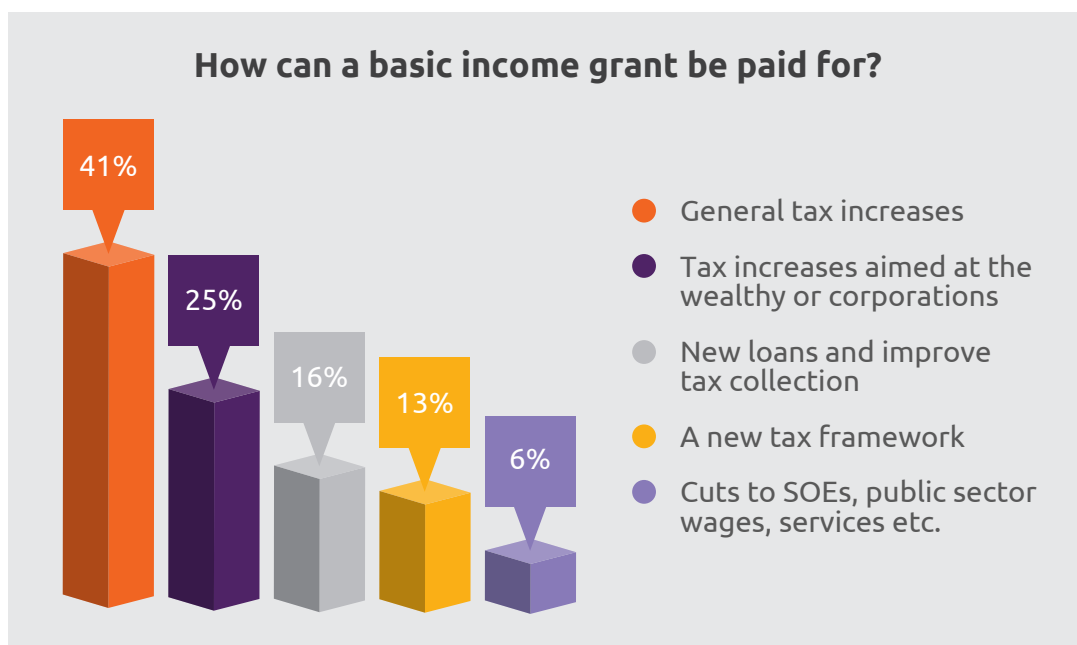
Although conservative economic narratives are prevalent in the media, there is a significant acknowledgement of the deep social need for grants expansion. As a result, discussions have moved beyond debating the idea of a basic income grant and towards debating how best to practically implement it.

The main debate on implementation is about the **form** that a basic income grant should take (see table 2). Some argue for a universal basic income grant that goes to everyone in the country. But a much more common argument is for a basic income grant that goes to only certain sections of the population, for example only to the unemployed. By far the most popular proposal on the form that a basic income grant should take is for the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant to be extended permanently for the unemployed and transformed into a basic income grant.

The second implementation debate is about how to **finance** a basic income grant. Some commentators argue that the government could only afford a basic income grant by implementing tax increases for everyone. Others argue for tax increases targeted only at the wealthy. Less popular ideas include financing a basic income grant through loans (by increasing government debt). Finally, there have been a handful of proposals to target cuts to things like State Owned Enterprises and public sector wages to pay for a basic income grant.

**Table 2: Debates over the implementation of a basic income grant**

<p><b>Form debates:</b> What should a BIG look like?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Extend the SRD grant as a pathway to BIG</li> <li>▪ BIG should be targeted at the unemployed</li> <li>▪ BIG should be targeted at unemployed job seekers</li> <li>▪ BIG should be targeted at the youth</li> <li>▪ BIG should be unconditional (universal BIG)</li> <li>▪ BIG should be implemented gradually</li> </ul>
<p><b>Financing debates:</b> How can a BIG be paid for?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ General tax increases</li> <li>▪ Tax increases aimed at the wealthy or corporations</li> <li>▪ Take out loans and improve tax collection.</li> <li>▪ A new tax framework</li> <li>▪ Cuts to SOEs, public sector wages, public services etc.</li> </ul>

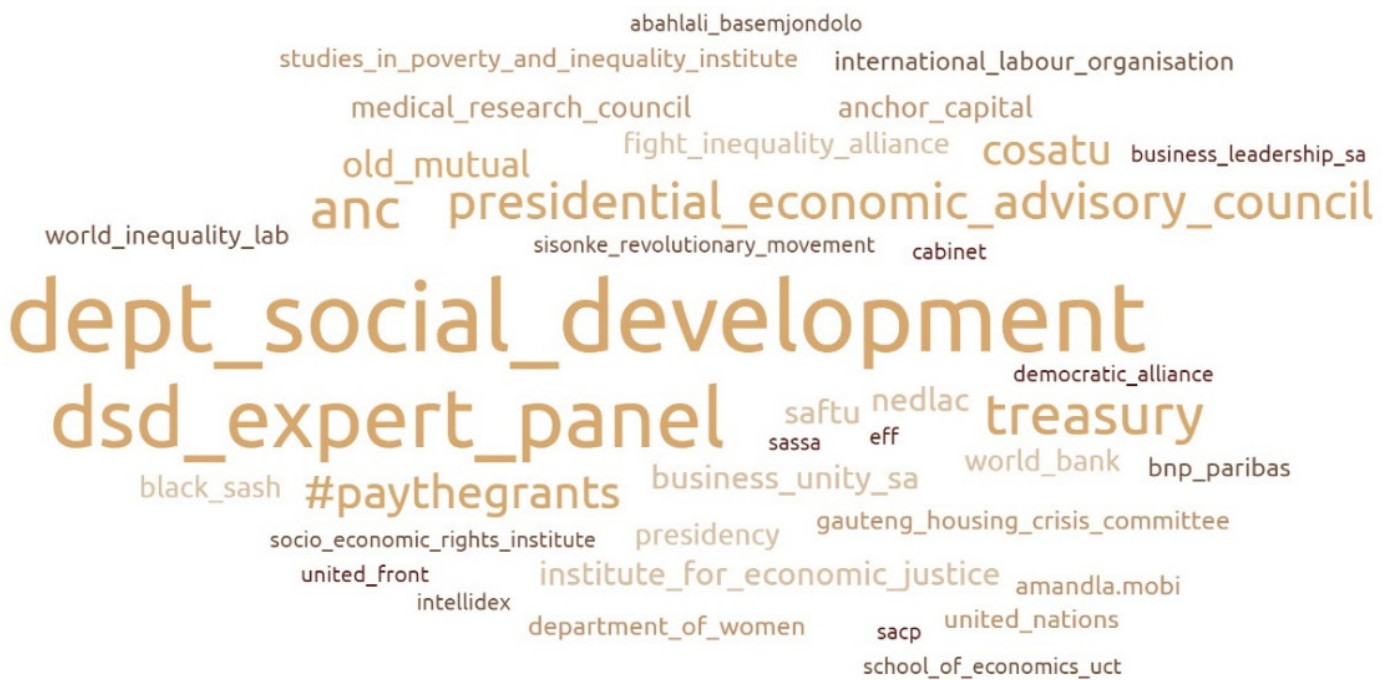


## Who is dominating the basic income grant debate and what are they saying?

The Department of Social Development (DSD) and the Expert Panel that produced a special report for the DSD created the most buzz over the basic income grant in the mainstream media during the period in question. Both the DSD and the Expert Panel have primarily advocated for a cautious or gradual implementation of the basic income grant. From the 50 articles in the sample, the DSD and the Expert Panel were together responsible for 40 comments on the basic income grant. The next most prominent organisational commentators were the ANC with 11 comments and Treasury with 10. Treasury has mostly highlighted the potential negative effects that a basic income grant would have on the economy.

A handful of civil society organisations have made inroads into the debate to support a basic income grant, led by the #PayTheGrants campaign. Both local and international business and international financial institutions have also commented, generally to push the debate towards targeting a basic income grant at smaller sections of the population.

In terms of individual commentators, President Cyril Ramaphosa and Minister of Social Development Lindiwe Zulu have engaged in the debate most with 15 comments each. Ramaphosa has generally acknowledged the need for greater state support for the poor while Zulu has been more forthright in her support for the introduction of a basic income grant. Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana entered the debate 11 times and has largely advanced conservative economic narratives about the potential adverse outcomes of a basic income grant.



## Questions for narrative change and the basic income grant

Based on our findings, we have identified four key questions that we believe may be important to informing narrative change about the economy.

### QUESTION 1: WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO CONTEST CONSERVATIVE ECONOMIC NARRATIVES?

A range of different arguments frame the basic income grant as a social imperative – or something that our society can “no longer afford **not** to have”.<sup>3</sup> These arguments can be framed as a “**social needs narratives**”.

Commentators employing social needs narratives generally argue that a basic income grant is necessary if we are to avoid a complete social crisis, since the economy is not creating jobs or other sources of income for people. For example,

“There is no alternative to a system of income support for income-compromised adults from the ages of 18 to 59 as a permanent part of the social protection framework” – Alex van den Heever, University of Witwatersrand and a member of the DSD Expert Panel.<sup>4</sup>

This narrative is also one that many figures in government repeat. **But**, the conservative economic narrative remains the dominant narrative.

Conservative economic narratives argue that any increase in social spending is “unaffordable” or that there is a “lack of resources”. These arguments are strengthened by the narrative that South Africa is on the brink of a “fiscal crisis” or a “debt crisis”, and that we should be concerned about the “risks” of rolling out basic income grant.

#### Headline: “Basic income grant is laden with risk for the future”

The power of conservative economic narratives is that they have been established as **common sense ideas**. In other words, if the government spends more money than it receives, the country will fall into a debt crisis. This corresponds with our understanding of the dangers of going into debt as an individual or as a household.

The widespread acknowledgement of the social need for improved state support for the poor is, therefore, tempered by conservative economic narratives that warn about the possibility of an even worse crisis if the government cannot pay off its debt.

In the media, two types of arguments are put forward that contest the conservative economic narratives at an economic level. These narratives could be called *Heterodox* or *Keynesian* economic arguments as they reject mainstream neoliberal ideas that form much of the conservative economic narratives that we find in the media.

The first argues that “grants are needed to promote participation in the economy” and the second argues that “a basic income grant will increase economic growth and stimulate economy”. We view these arguments as operating together as “economic stimulus narratives” – that is, a set of ideas that casts a basic income grant as not simply a solution to a social crisis but as **a solution to an economic crisis**.

Both the social needs and economic stimulus narratives argue in favour of a basic income grant to redistribute wealth and secure livelihoods. The narratives around grants expansion being a social imperative is convincing because of the obvious nature of the social crisis that faces the poor and the unemployed. But it does not answer the age-old question “where will the money come from?” that is routinely put forward through conservative economic narratives. On the other hand, economic stimulus narratives embrace Keynesian economic theory to advance a redistributive agenda and contest conservative economic narratives on their own terms – that is, in terms of concern for the health of the economy.

We found, however, that economic stimulus narratives were weak in the mainstream media. Even though there are organisations and individuals advancing these arguments through research reports and op-eds, the position of conservative economic narratives remains dominant.

<sup>3</sup> Bret Herron, “South Africa’s shocking jobless figures make a Basic Income Grant a social, moral and historical imperative”, *Daily Maverick*, 30 August 2021

<sup>4</sup> Prinesha Naidoo, “Panel proposes gradual start to basic income grant”, *Timeslive*, 13 December 2021

### Questions for further discussion.

- How best can we contest conservative economic narratives?
- Should we use narratives that emphasise the negative social consequences of neoliberal economic policies, or should we use narratives that emphasise the negative economic consequences of these policies?

## QUESTION 2: SHOULD SUPPORTERS OF A BASIC INCOME GRANT EMPHASISE NEEDS OR RIGHTS?

Almost all commentators involved in the basic income grant debate agree that some form of state intervention is required to address people's **basic needs** and, as a result, to address **poverty** and **inequality**. This "basic needs narrative" appeared 35 times in our sample, making it by far the most common way that a basic income grant is advocated for. Even commentators that warn against the economic dangers of introducing a basic income grant do not advance arguments that oppose the idea that the state must intervene to support the poor (and particularly the unemployed). This has opened the space for the proponents of a basic income grant to have their voices heard in the mainstream media.

The second most prevalent justification for introducing a basic income grant is that it will promote social cohesion or prevent further social unrest. This "social cohesion narrative" appears 9 times in our sample. It is likely to appeal most to sections of the middle class that are concerned about how the deepening social and economic crises are generating increased political instability. This narrative emerged in our sample in the wake of the 2021 July unrest.

The arguments that a basic income grant is needed to move away from austerity and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic each appear 5 times. We assume that the pandemic has opened the space for more critiques of Treasury's economic model to reach the mainstream. However, critiques of government austerity were not always well-articulated enough to convince readers who may not be familiar with the terminology. The fact that it is difficult to convey complex ideas through media advocacy work is something to keep in mind for future narrative change efforts.

Finally, advocates for a basic income grant have not employed human rights framing with any regularity. Out of our sample of 50 articles, we detected only 3 examples of the call for grants expansion being cast as a requirement to address people's basic rights. In one illustrative case, an activist from the #PayTheGrants campaign was quoted employing a clear rights framing:

"This is not a favour, this is not a privilege from the state – but it is the people's right" – General Moyo, #PayTheGrants Campaign.<sup>5</sup>

However, each case of rights framing appeared in *Maverick Citizen*, a section of the *Daily Maverick* that claims to focus on issues of "social justice". While important, this would suggest that the rights narrative has less purchase in the wider media. This means that there is a danger that the use of rights-based narratives may only be "speaking to the converted".

There is, potentially, far greater scope for framing the demand for a basic income grant as a matter of human rights in this way, especially in activists' interaction with journalists during protests, press conferences or interviews.

### Questions for further discussion.

- Should the demand for a basic income grant be framed more clearly as a rights issue or is it best to continue to emphasise the "basic needs narrative"?
- Is there a way to connect the two?
- How can we get our message out beyond the converted?

## QUESTION 3: HOW WILL A BASIC INCOME GRANT WORK AND WHAT PRACTICAL DEMANDS SHOULD WE MAKE?

The media narrative has shifted from a debate over whether a basic income grant is appropriate to a debate on how to implement it with a focus on (1) the **feasibility** of implementing a basic income grant, (2) how to **finance** a basic income grant and (3) the **form** that a basic income grant should take.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Evans, "Civil Society calls for reinstatement of Social Relief of Distress grant and unconditional Basic Income Grant", *Daily Maverick*, 14 July 2021



Conservative economic narratives dominate concern over the **feasibility** of implementing a basic income grant. Despite acknowledging the need for a basic income grant, many commentators express a sense of anxiety about the limits of the budgetary framework and the dangers of a debt crisis.

This, in turn, means that there is extensive discussion of how to **finance** a basic income grant. The most common proposal is to pay for a basic income grant through general tax increases. This is followed closely by proposals to either increase corporate tax or introduce a wealth tax, in other words, to tax the rich.

Proposals based on alternative sources such as debt financing, revenue improvements and a restructuring of the tax framework have garnered some attention. The financing debates are naturally somewhat superficial, with the media at times capitalising on headlines that sensationalise rather than deepen the debate.

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### Headline: “Government’s plan to give basic income to everyone in South Africa – and it wants tax hikes to fund it”

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Discussions of financing are difficult. They often employ complex and technical language that is difficult for ordinary people to understand. This allows those who push the conservative economic narrative to exploit people’s fears about debt and the ‘fiscal risk’ a basic income grant poses.

There are also debates on the **form** a basic income grant should take. The premise of a basic income grant for many of its most committed supporters is that it should be universal. This means that everyone in the country should receive a grant, no matter the income level. The primary advantage of a universal basic income grant (UBIG) is that no one will fall through the cracks.

Powerful international lobbyists have entered the debate in the South African media landscape to support a basic income grant but only under specific conditions. For example, The World Bank and BNP Paribas have entered the debate to insist that a basic income grant should be conditional on job seeking.

The DSD’s Expert Panel Report has often been associated with a “means tested” grant that makes a basic income grant conditional on unemployment. Lindiwe Zulu uses the language of a basic income grant “for the unemployed”. SAFTU’s Zwelinzima Vavi has also been quoted as advocating for a basic income grant targeted specifically towards the unemployed. Enoch Godongwana has narrowed the focus of any potential grant even further, calling for support for only unemployed black youth.

#### Questions for further discussion.

- What form do you think a basic income grant should take?
- How can we popularise discussions on the financing of a basic income grant?
- How can we take the ‘fear’ out of discussions of debt?

### QUESTION 4: IS THE GOVERNMENT DIVIDED ON THE BASIC INCOME GRANT OR IS IT PLAYING POLITICS?

President Ramaphosa, Minister Lindiwe Zulu, the Department of Social Development and other state actors have repeatedly voiced their *conditional* support for a basic income grant. Their support for a basic income grant appears to be dependent on its implementation within the limits of the resources available in the budget. However, they also appear open to proposals that may provide more revenue to finance a basic income grant through changes to tax.

“While Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana and his predecessor, Tito Mboweni, have said an income grant is currently unaffordable, Ramaphosa and Social Development Minister Lindiwe Zulu have said the measure — which would be the biggest of its kind globally if implemented — should be considered to alleviate poverty.”<sup>6</sup>  
– Anthony Sguazzin, *MoneyWeb*.

On the other hand, Treasury have been much more categorical that there are no resources for a basic income grant. It is interesting to note that Godongwana has repeatedly employed the “dependency narrative” to bolster his economic policy position – that is, he argues that grants will make people dependent on government handouts and less willing to engage in economic activity. This corresponds with the widespread negative perceptions about grant recipients that we found in research brief 1.

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony Sguazzin, “Ramaphosa advisors divided over implementing basic income grant”, *Moneyweb*, 1 February 2022



The Department of Social Development appears to be one of the strongest advocates for a basic income grant, while Treasury is its strongest opponent. But what does this apparent division within the state mean?

Political economist Patrick Bond has long argued that there is a stark difference in the *rhetoric* employed by the ANC government and the *reality* of their economic and social policies.<sup>7</sup> He used the metaphor “**talk left, walk right**” to explain the historical role that the ANC has played as the governing party. In other words, he was arguing that the ANC has been able to use its liberation movement credentials to convince people that it has progressive intentions at the very same time as it implements neoliberal policies that hurt the poor.

With this history in mind, it seems advisable that civil society thinks carefully about how it interacts with government departments, especially when looking for allies to advance its demands.

#### **Questions for further discussion.**

- Should civil society take government’s help where it is willing to advance progressive agendas, or should it strive to build its narrative change and advocacy efforts more independently?

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<sup>7</sup> Bond, P. (2004). Talk left, walk right: rhetoric and reality in the new South Africa. *Global Dialogue*, 6(3/4), 127.

## Case study 2. The public sector wage bill – a threat to the economy?

The fight over the public sector wage bill represents a battle over what society thinks the state is for and what role it believes the public service should play in reducing poverty and inequality.

The current debate over the public sector wage bill began in 2018 when a three-year wage agreement was signed. The agreement meant that those employed on salaries between R6,900 per month and R18,500 per month (levels 1-7) would get a 1% wage increase, and those earning between R23,000 per month and R34,200 per month (levels 8-10) would get a 0.5% increase. These wage increases were well below the rate of inflation. This means that workers' spending power actually declined. In simpler terms, they were worse off than before.

In 2020, the last year of the agreement, the government refused to pay the increase, saying that it was unaffordable and partly blaming the economic consequences of the pandemic. The Public Service Co-ordinating Bargaining Council attempted to negotiate a new settlement, but it was rejected by the unions who then approached the Labour Appeal Court to enforce the original 2018 wage agreement.

The Labour Appeal Court then ruled that the government should not be made to pay the increase. The judgement argued,

Under the present financial circumstances, it does not appear to be **just and equitable** to order government to expend significant and scarce financial resources on employees whose jobs are already secured and salaries have been paid in full, particularly in circumstances where the imperative exists for the recovery of the economy to the benefit of millions of vulnerable people. For example, the provision of social grants to fellow South Africans living on the margin could well be imperilled by such a decision - Labour Appeal Court, judgement, 2020.<sup>8</sup>

The Unions then approached the Constitutional Court to challenge the Labour Appeal Court judgement. However, the Constitutional Court upheld the judgement stating that

The [unions] and their members can be said to have been **unjustifiably enriched**, they actually and materially benefitted from the impugned collective agreement. Firstly, the employees had their jobs secured and received year-on-year salary increments in the public sector, outstripping inflation and outperforming the private sector salary increases. This occurred at a time when the rest of the country's workforce, including high-echelon public servants, Cabinet and Parliament, had suffered salary cuts or freezes as a consequence of the economic and the COVID-19 pandemic - Constitutional Court judgement, 2022)<sup>9</sup>

The judgements by the Labour Appeal Court and the Constitutional Court represent a very clear view about the public sector. Their wages are seen as a threat to the South African economy, responsible for slow growth and rising debt. The salaries of the public service are framed as coming at the expense of others in society who are more vulnerable. For example, the Labour Appeal Court judgement infers that a rise in public sector salaries would mean that it would not be possible to have a basic income grant.

Narratives that view the public sector as a drain on the economy are intensified by issues of corruption and poor service delivery. Meaning that there are widespread negative perceptions of the public service.

Yet, the public sector remains central to the realisation of human rights. Most South Africans believe that the state should play a central role in addressing inequality and poverty (see Brief 1). A strong public service is central to this. However, the public sector and service delivery are increasingly seen as opposing priorities as the wage bill takes up the largest portion of social spending.

The media debate about the public sector wage bill is important because it illustrates how conservative economic narratives construct a particularly biased view about the economy, how it functions and who it should serve.

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<sup>8</sup> Public Servants Association and Others v Minister of Public Service and Others [2020] ZALAC

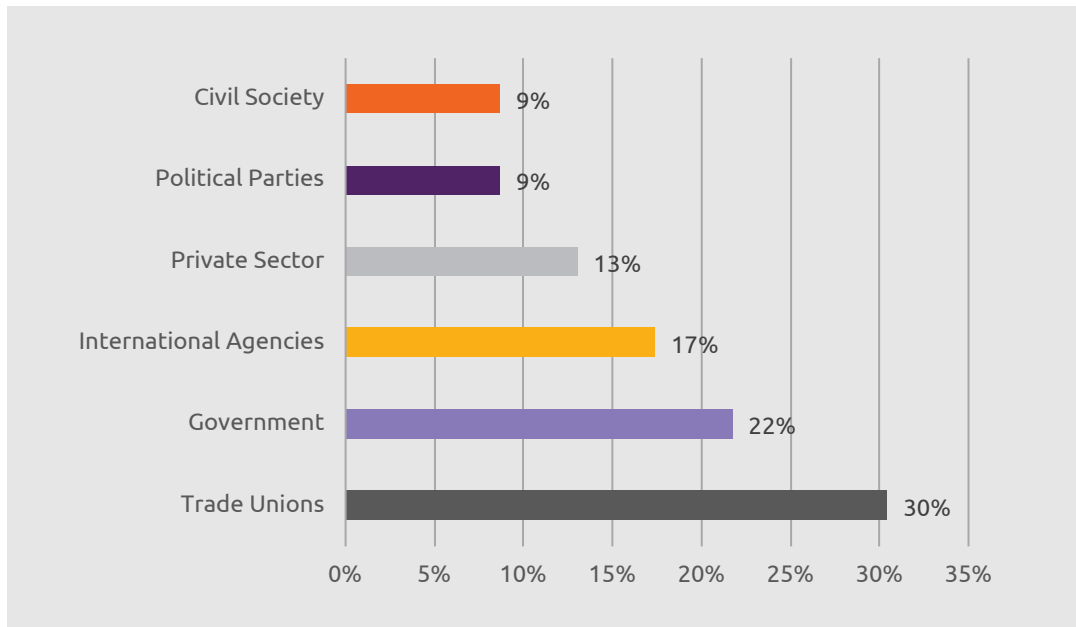
<sup>9</sup> National Education Health and Allied Workers Union v Minister of Public Service and Administration and Others; South African Democratic Teachers Union and Others v Department of Public Service and Administration and Others; Public Servants Association and Others v Minister of Public Service and Administration and Others; National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers Union v Minister of Public Service and Administration and Others [2022] ZACC

## How is the public sector wage bill discussed in the media?

Overall, discussions about the public sector wage bill are framed within **conservative economic narratives** that say that the wage bill is **too high**.

The media landscape is dominated by voices from government, the private sector and international agencies who all agree with this position. They argue that the high wage bill takes up too large a portion of government's social spending, that public sector salaries are high compared to other countries and compared to salaries in the private sector.

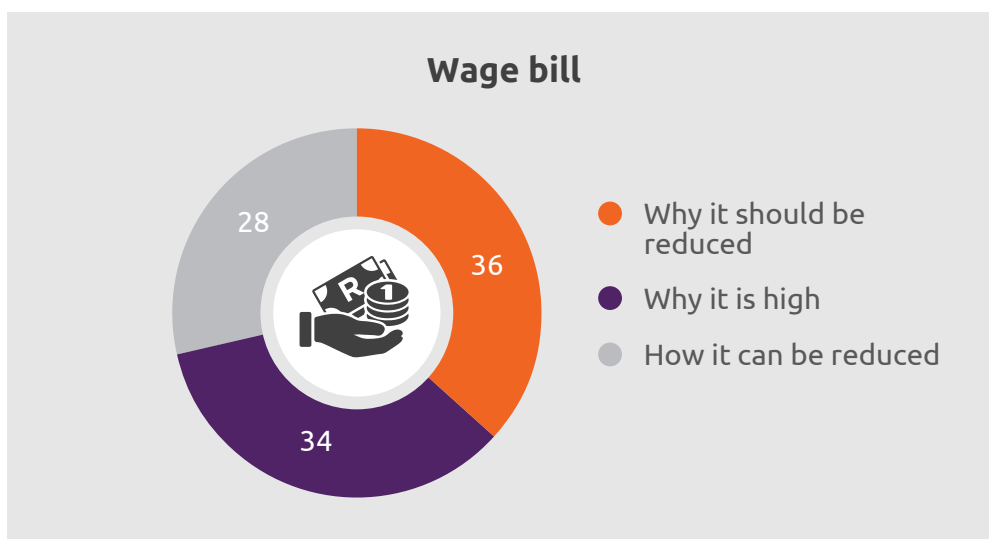
While trade unions have a strong voice in the debate, they have struggled to contest this narrative. Similarly, civil society organisations feature less prominently in discussions of the wage bill.



As a result, most of the narratives in the media focus on

- Why it is high.
- Why it should be reduced and,
- How it can be reduced.

Overall, these discussions consolidate the conservative economic narrative that argues that reducing the wage bill will help the economy and that this will be for the common good.



### Why is the wage bill high?

The dominant explanation here is that the South African public service is **'bloated'**. The argument is that there are too many government employees and that they are collectively paid too much. This is a narrative that is not really contested in the media.

Trade unions seem to accept the idea that the public sector is too big. However, they often blame this on “ghost workers” and duplication of functions across the three spheres of government.

Trade unions also concede that *some* public servants are paid too much, such as senior officials or executives of state-owned enterprises. They regularly distinguish these individuals from frontline workers that provide social services, which they argue are paid too little.

### How can the wage bill be reduced?

Two proposals repeatedly emerged in the media debate. The first is that the number of people employed should be reduced, sometimes known as **reducing the headcount**. The second is to **freeze wages**.

Trade unions and some individual commentators challenge the proposal to **reduce the headcount**. They argue that a reduction in the headcount would unavoidably target frontline service employees and compromise the capacity of departments to provide essential services. This would compound already existing shortages in departments such as health, education and the police – many of which, the unions suggest, are already having to cut staff because of austerity budgeting.

Instead, trade unions argue that the government needs to focus on **job creation** in the public sector, especially in departments like health and education that can address poverty and inequality. This argument underscores how the public sector can act in the interests of the common good and not against it.

Trade unions have argued for a **freeze on wages** that targets the salaries of senior managers and executives of state-owned enterprises. The salaries of frontline workers, they insist, should be increased.

Reluctance to implement a differentiated wage freeze targeted at the top earners is blamed on the ANC’s cadre deployment policy.

### Why should the wage bill be reduced?

The overall narrative from the state and capital is that the wage bill should be reduced because it is a **threat to the common good**. This argument is made by focussing on value for money and the threat to the fiscus.

There is a strong narrative that the amount spent on the public sector wage bill is not providing **value for money** because service delivery is often poor. Trade unions insist that the wage increase they demand is proportionate to the services public servants provide.

In opposition to this demand, is the way in which the public service is framed as a **threat to the fiscus** and blamed for increasing debt and economic instability.

The argument is that given the current economic difficulties the country faces, a rising wage bill is likely to cripple government spending and the rate of increase is unsustainable within government’s current budget. It is argued that while economic growth is slow, the wage bill should be frozen.

The government is also under constraints because of loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary fund that require it to reduce public sector spending and focus on paying debt. These loans, it argues, should be for stimulating the economy and not paying public sector salaries. This underscores the idea that the public sector is a drain to the economy rather than something that integral to it.

## Questions for narrative change and the public sector wage bill

Based on our findings, we have identified four key questions that we believe may be important to informing narrative change about the economy.

### QUESTION 1: WHO IS THE PUBLIC SECTOR FOR?

We have seen how the debates over the public sector wage bill are framed around the **conservative economic narrative** that says that the wage bill is too high. Public sector employees are ultimately painted as being greedy, a drain on scarce resources and a threat to the common good.

One such expression of this is how the basic income grant and increasing the public sector wage bill are set up in opposition to each other. The argument is that South Africa can either have the basic income grant or a higher wage bill, but not both. In this argument, commentators present the wage bill as a cost that takes resources from those who deserve it – i.e the poor and unemployed.

Trade unions also appear to play into this narrative when they draw out distinctions between which public servants deserve pay rises and whose pay should be frozen.

Government representatives often frame public sector workers as a drain on resources. Public sector workers are rarely framed as having a productive role in society. The idea that the public sector is a drain on scarce resources is compounded by widespread perceptions about endemic corruption in the public sector and general experiences of poor service delivery. This has given rise to the thinking that increasing resources that go towards the state is not an investment that can yield returns for the economy or ordinary people.

This leads to the debate making a distinction between public services, which are understood to function in the interests of the common good, and the workers who deliver those services, but who are seen as a threat to the common good. The competition set-up between public servants and societal interests undermines the interactions between public servants and the communities they are embedded in as workers and community members.

All of this opens important questions about how we shape the narrative about the public sector.

#### Questions for further discussion.

- What is the purpose of the state and, therefore, the public service in society?
- How do we shape debates about the role of the state and the public service in society?

### QUESTION 2: HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND THE ROLE OF THE STATE IN THE ECONOMY?

There are differing ideas about what role the state should play in society.

Neoliberal logic views the state as existing outside of the economy with the primary purpose of facilitating the business of capital. This logic reduces the economy to private businesses, and it suggests that the strength of an economy is determined by the freedom that private companies have to operate without state interference.

On the other hand, Keynesian logic views the state as playing a central role in the economy with the primary purpose of intervening in the economy in times of economic recession. This logic suggests that the state can manage the capitalist economy to ultimately benefit all classes in society, even if it must regulate the activities of private business.

In the past, the government's economic policy documents have employed Keynesian language to characterise the country as a '**developmental state**'. The National Development Plan sets out a vision of what this means:

A developmental state brings about rapid and sustainable transformation in a country's economic and/or social conditions through active, intensive and effective intervention in the structural causes of economic or social underdevelopment.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, the role of the state is to intervene in the economy in the interest of addressing poverty and inequality. However, the state that we have would appear to be the opposite of this.

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<sup>10</sup> National Planning Commission. (2011). *National development plan, vision 2030*. pp. 409.

Since 1994, the South African state has prioritised **outsourcing** in its social, political and economic strategy. Outsourcing is when the government offers tenders to companies to provide services on behalf of the state.

The vast expansion of outsourcing in the post-apartheid state has led some commentators to characterise South Africa as a **'contract state'** – i.e. a state where the key business of the state is outsourced to other parties, usually private businesses, so that those services are provided for profit.

If services are increasingly outsourced then this shrinks the size of the public sector. It means that services are not actually provided by the state but by private companies who operate them for profit paid for by the poor.

#### Questions for further discussion.

- What role should the state play in the economy?
- It has become commonly accepted that the state needs to tender out its service provision functions to contracted companies. Can we contest this view and change the narrative?

### QUESTION 3: HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND THE ROLE OF DEBT IN AN ECONOMY?

The government justifications for why it cannot honour the public sector wage agreement and why we can't afford a basic income grant often hinge around the idea of **debt** and that the government's priority should be to reduce its debt.

Discussions of debt appeal to everyday experiences and understandings of debt. If a household regularly spends more than it receives in income, it will go broke. If it has to borrow money to survive but cannot pay back that debt, bad things are likely to happen. The state and capital use this understanding of debt as a justification to avoid progressive spending. However, state debt and household debt are nothing alike.

If a household reduces its spending on food to save money, only that household will feel the effects – they may go to bed hungry, for example. But the economy, as a whole, is unlikely to feel the effects – it is unlikely that a farmworker or a worker at Shoprite will lose their job because a household spends less on food.

But when a government decides to reduce spending to pay off debt **everyone** feels the consequences. This is because the state is responsible for a large share of the spending in an economy. So if the government reduces spending on the public sector wages, all the people employed by the state – teachers, nurses, the police, etc. – have less money to spend. This, in turn, reduces the government's income as it does not get the money from VAT on goods and other forms of tax revenue.

Instead, many economists argue that in a time of economic uncertainty it is important to increase government spending on the public sector and in social spending in general. However, because the everyday experiences of debt and its consequences are so real to people, this idea often seems irresponsible. These concerns are then amplified by both the state and capital.

#### Questions for further discussion.

- How can we explain what government debt is to people?
- Would a better understanding of debt shift the narrative on how people understand its function in society?

### QUESTION 4: HOW DO WE THINK ABOUT COLLECTIVE BARGAINING IN A TIME OF HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT?

Collective bargaining is the process where trade unions and employers negotiate around wages, benefits and working conditions. It is an important process for all workers to secure better wages and working conditions.

When the government broke the wage agreement, it argued that it could no longer afford the wage increase due to the economic context that had been made worse by COVID-19.

As we have shown, the debates over the public sector wage bill are framed around a **conservative economic narrative** that says that the wage bill is too high. Public sector workers are effectively framed as greedy, a drain on scarce resources and a threat to the common good.

The judgements from the Labour Appeal Court and the Constitutional Court emphasised this idea when they pit the provision of services to the most vulnerable and an increase in public servants' salaries against each other.

This narrative is amplified by the private sector and government who frame collective bargaining as a threat to economic stability. They say that the demands of workers and their unions have the potential to unbalance the budget and increase

government debt and spending. Collective bargaining is framed as yet another obstacle to what is in the best interest of all – a strong economy.

This is potentially not just a problem for public sector workers but also for private sector workers should companies follow the state's lead in breaking collective agreements. This threatens the wages that workers have been able to secure through years of struggle.

However, in the context of high unemployment, there may not be an appetite for large sections of the unemployed or precariously employed to fight for and defend workers' rights.

**Questions for further discussion.**

- Do you think that there is an attack on workers' collective bargaining rights?
- Can we find a way to contest the narrative that pits the interests of workers and the unemployed against each other?

## Concluding thoughts on lessons for narrative change in a neoliberal world

Narrative change is based on the idea that what we say – the stories we tell about social issues – matter. And that a vital part of social change can be telling new stories to help to bring about radical change by shifting how people think, feel and act about social issues.

The first part of this project has been to identify what narratives are dominant in how we speak about the economy and who is using them. This is only one step in the narrative change process. How we think about shifting the narrative will depend on you.

To unpack what the dominant media narratives about the economy are we broke this down into two case studies: the basic income grant and the public sector wage bill. Each case study provides insight into debates on the economy, how it should function, and, crucially, on the state's role in managing the economy through policy and other interventions.

Two contesting narratives emerge from our case studies. One narrative paints a picture of the unemployed as the “deserving poor” or worthy of receiving income support. The other paints a picture of “unjustifiably enriched” public sector workers who eat up limited state resources. These narratives ultimately work together to pit two sections of the working class against one another.

Campaigns for a basic income grant have been able to advocate for the basic income grant as a social necessity. In some ways this has pushed back against widespread views that the unemployed as lazy or a drain on society. The fact that media outlets now readily use StatsSA's expanded unemployment figure (as opposed to the “official” unemployment figure) suggests that there has even been an acceptance in the mainstream that unemployment is a permanent or structural feature of the economy. In this context, state support for the unemployed is beginning to be accepted as a necessity.

However, despite the significant advances made through activist and advocacy work on the basic income grant, the debate in the media is still dominated by **conservative economic narratives**. These narratives are established as common sense (or matter of fact) and serve to persistently remind the public and policy makers that there is a “shortage of state resources” and an “impending debt crisis” should the state “spend too much money”.

In the debates over the basic income grant, there have been attempts to push back against conservative economic narratives by emphasising the clear social need to spend more money to support the poor – **social needs narratives**. There have also been attempts to counter conservative economic narratives with **economic stimulus narratives** that suggest more state spending could, in fact, improve the economy.

In the debate over the public sector wage bill, on the other hand, conservative economic narratives are mostly uncontested. There is tacit agreement from all parties that the wage bill is too high. The public sector unions have primarily entered the debate to differentiate ordinary workers from highly paid state officials, exonerating the former and blaming the latter for the bloated wage bill.

Narrative change efforts have the potential to redirect the debate on public sector wages to emphasise the social need to support ordinary workers and pay them more. In other words, there is clearly scope to push back against the narrative of the “unjustifiably enriched worker”.

But for as long as our narrative change efforts are unable to turn the tide against conservative economic narratives like the idea that there is a “shortage of resources”, then there will always be someone to scapegoat.

In both case studies, the threat of debt and a **'debt crisis'** is used as a justification for why civil society demands for grants or trade union demands for salary increases are, at best, unfeasible and, at worst, a risk to the entire economy. What this raises is the need to push for narrative change around the risks of debt and the role of the state in the economy.

Emphasising the social need for progressive economic policy reforms is important. But so is contesting the logic of conservative economic narratives by exploring other ways of thinking about the economy. And specifically, other ways of thinking about the redistributive role that the state can play in the economy.

A key consideration for this project is the extent to which human rights can be used as a tool to advocate for economic rights. While some activists and civil society organisations use the language of rights, it is not a narrative that has entered the mainstream discussion. This raises questions about how we see the role of rights in our struggles. Some of these questions will be explored in the next research brief (brief 3).



## Appendix 1: Methodological note

This methodological note provides details on how the research was conducted using content and discourse analysis of media articles.

### Sampling

For each theme, we searched for media articles over a 12-month period (1 February 2021 to 31 January 2022) using Google Advanced Search. The keywords were 'basic income' and 'public sector wage bill'. We opted to use Google Advanced Search as we found this offered a wider range of sources compared to media clipping services like SA Media.

For the basic income grant 185 articles were downloaded for this time period and 58 articles for the public sector wage bill. We then drew a random sample of 50 articles for each theme and conducted the analysis on these articles.

### Content and discourse analysis

We conducted both content and discourse analysis on the sample of media articles. Content analysis allows us to track the prevalence of the different narratives for each theme. For example, we can track how often a narrative such as "grants create dependency" appears in our sample. This gives us a general indication of the power of each narrative and the traction it has in the mainstream media.

For the discourse analysis we drew from Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach.<sup>11</sup> This approach sees text as both *representations of* and *constitutive of* reality. In other words, the approach is both to identify discourses and consider how they operate in our world. It also tries to explain why discourses are powerful, often analysing how they relate to base assumptions that people have of their world.

Codes were developed both inductively and deductively through an initial reading of the texts. The codes were then further developed as we undertook the coding. For the content analysis we coded the data at the level of the narratives. This entailed developing code books of narratives for the two themes after reading through all the articles downloaded for the year. We then applied them to each article in the samples, reworked the codebooks to refine our categorisation of the different narratives, and then reapplied the reworked codes to the articles.

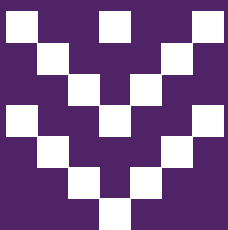
In the process of the coding work, we grouped the different coded narratives together when they form part of a particular discourse. This assisted us with developing an analysis of the discursive practices that exist on issues about the economy and how it works or how it should be run.

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<sup>11</sup> Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Routledge.







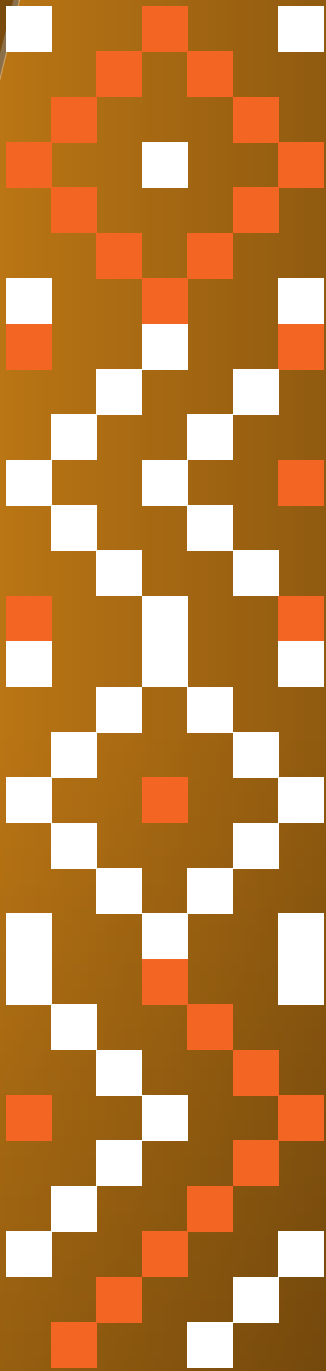
Centre for Social Change

BRIEF

3



CENTRE FOR  
SOCIAL CHANGE



# Shifting the narrative about human rights and the economy

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Reflections on narrative change and rights-based activism

The Future Reimagined

**CENTER** for  
**ECONOMIC** and  
**SOCIAL RIGHTS**



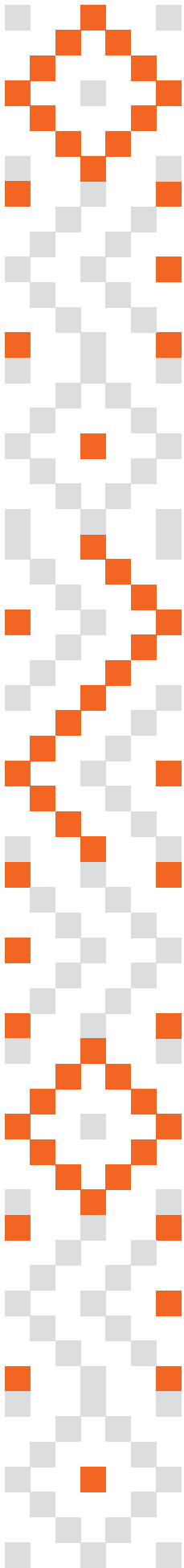
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## Introduction

Shifting the Narrative about Human Rights and the Economy is a joint project between the Fight Inequality Alliance (FIA), the Centre for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) and the Centre for Social Change (CSC). Guidance was also provided by the Frameworks Institute. This project is supported by a grant from the Open Society Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, narrative change projects have been an effective method of challenging dominant ideas in society in favour of more progressive ideas.

The organisations involved in the Shifting the Narrative project share a common perspective on the socially and environmentally destructive nature of neoliberal economic policies across the world, and in South Africa in particular. The goal of this project is to identify counter-hegemonic narratives to contest neoliberal discourse and engage in the 'battle for ideas' over how best to run our societies.

To engage in this type of activist and advocacy work, we first ought to map the existing landscape. In other words, we wanted to build a picture of how economic issues are already being discussed and debated in public and activists spheres.

Our research agenda took three angles; 1) to understand the social attitudes of the South African public to issues about the economy and economic justice; 2) to develop a picture of the debates on the economy that take place in the mainstream media and 3) to reflect on what activists have to say about rights-based campaigns for social justice and our overall reflections on what the research has to tell us about narrative change.

**This brief provides reflections on narrative change and rights-based activism.** It considers what narrative change is and how activists use and speak about rights-based activism. The brief then discusses what the prospects for using human rights as part of a narrative change project around the economy may be.

## Shifting the narrative about human rights and the economy

Who holds power—and how they use it—is embedded in and supported by dominant narratives. We see this dynamic in the dominant narratives about the economy. In the research on the media narratives about the basic income grant and the public sector wage bill, we saw how conservative economic narratives overshadowed other narratives in various ways. This contributes to the widespread idea that “there is no alternative” to neoliberal capitalism. As a result, even if, as we have shown, there is general support for interventions like a basic income grant, most people doubt whether it can be feasible. Most people still believe that the free market is best equipped to distribute resources in society. This idea, as this research has highlighted, remains persistent despite the fact there is ample evidence of the damage that neoliberalism does to society. This is because, as Marx once argued, “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas”.<sup>2</sup>

This research was undertaken to explore the role of narrative change as a tool for social change and shifting the dominant narratives about the economy. Briefs 1<sup>3</sup> and 2<sup>4</sup> considered how the public and the media frame and narrate economic issues. In the next section of this brief, we consider how activists use and frame the language of human rights and rights-based activism.

Narrative change agendas have a long history. Contesting the ideas of the ruling class and building alternative narratives has always been central to the bigger task of creating a more egalitarian society.

### What is narrative change?

The idea of narrative change is to introduce alternative ideas, narratives and stories that disrupt, counter, contest or replace the currently dominant narratives.<sup>5</sup>

### What is a narrative?

A narrative is an idea or a set of connected ideas that repeatedly emerge in verbal or written form. For example, arguments that sound similar to each other or stories that follow the same pattern can all work together to form a narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> The findings and views expressed in this report are those of the authors only.

<sup>2</sup> Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1939). *The German Ideology*. The Marx-Engels Institute, Moscow.

<sup>3</sup> Runciman, C., Dor, L. & Matlala, B. (2022). *Shifting the narrative about human rights and the economy: The public's views on the economy*. Centre for Social Change, University of Johannesburg.

<sup>4</sup> Dor, L. Matlala, B. & Runciman, C. (2022). *Shifting the narrative about human rights and the economy: Media analysis of the basic income grant and the public sector wage bill*. Centre for Social Change, University of Johannesburg.

<sup>5</sup> Frameworks Institute. (2021). *The Feature of Narratives: A Model of Narrative Form for Social Change Efforts*. Frameworks Institute. pp. 9



## Why are narratives powerful?

Narratives can be powerful because they package information in a way that is **easy to follow** and **convincing**. Just like stories, they often convey the author or speaker's *point of view* by drawing on the emotions or existing assumptions of the audience.

For example, the narrative that we are heading towards a **debt crisis** is convincing because it draws on our everyday understanding of debt being a bad thing. The narrative obscures the complexity required to understand how government debt actually works and preys on ordinary people's fears of going into debt.

## What is a counter-narrative?

A counter-narrative provides a different way of talking about or making sense of an issue. Counter-narratives come from activists who offer an alternative way to talk about issues.

## Where do human rights fit in narratives about economic issues?

This project aims to explore the potential for reframing narratives about the economy by emphasising the implications that economic issues have on human rights. In the next section of this brief, we consider what activists had to say about the use of rights-based campaigns and human rights.

## Reflecting on rights-based activism

This research was asked to consider how the language of human rights might be used to further economic rights and campaigns for economic justice. This raises a question about the differences between human rights, constitutional, and legislative rights.

**Human rights** are universal, meaning that they belong to everyone. They are also inalienable, meaning they are rights that cannot be taken away since you cannot lose the right to be human.

**Constitutional rights** are rights granted to citizens and residents who live in a particular country. These rights are restricted to the territory of a country. While they may embody the values of human rights, they are not universal and inalienable the way that human rights are.

**Legislative rights** are another form of rights that provide protection for different groups of people depending on specific criteria. For example, the Labour Relations Act sets out the framework for workers' rights but restricts who it defines as a worker and, therefore, who is entitled to worker rights. They are not universal and nor do they apply to all citizens or residents of a country.

Activists spoke about these different types of rights and how they use them in their struggles.

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*As activists, we do talk about **human rights** more especially in our gatherings... for example, when we want to have a community meeting, there will be 2 or 3 people that will ask us if the councillor of the particular ward knows about this gathering, then we tell them that we have a right to gather and we don't have to ask permission from the councillor to have a meeting. Then that is when we start showing people that **they have rights** and how to use their rights in the future when they also want to have a gathering to communicate a particular message to the community. They don't need permission from either the councillor or the president as **the constitution allows** for people to gather as long as there is no violence in our gatherings. So, I think this is the way we communicate people's rights within our community.*

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***Human rights are at the centre of mobilising** because water is a right, people need to have water, people need to have electricity, people need to have shelter, people need to have clothes, sports facilities. People have a right to have food, economy is there to deliver those rights.*

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*We wanted to show people that the energy it is women's issue and then **human rights are women's rights** they are not different, they are the same rights as men's rights.*

As these quotations from activists show, most agreed that rights-based mobilisation and campaigning were very important to the work that they do. What activists said illustrates how activists move between the different language of rights – interweaving discussions of human rights, constitutional rights and legislative rights. Human rights appeal to the idea that everyone is entitled to rights, while constitutional and legislative rights provide a potential framework to make those human rights real.

However, the knowledge and awareness of rights and human rights in communities is very uneven. As one activist reflected, often people do not think about human rights; they only think of their immediate problems. While people may know that they have a right to water, for example, the immediate need rather than rights language may be what motivates people to mobilise.

“ **People do not think of human rights**, they think of the immediate problem... they understand that [water] is a basic necessity and makes them angry, right? Because what informs that, what informs that is that they understand that this need, this is our right, we are entitled to this and it is not coming forward, what do we do? We get mobilised and it was so easy to mobilise people around this issue of water because it's something that, it's an immediate thing, it's a basic need.

Another activist explained that it can be difficult to mobilise people around the idea of rights if they do not know they have rights in the first place.

“ **They don't even know whether to have water is their human rights, they don't know even to have shelter is their human rights**, so to organise around something that you don't even [know] whether it is a need or want, they just think no you cannot... organise around that. It's also another waste of time cause at the end people they don't know what are their rights... they don't know to have a clean drinking water it's a human right. They just like to say no it's been the municipality its corruption but they don't know that they can take other steps to make sure that they hold the government to account to give them clean water... **So it is important to educate people** of something that you are going to do so that you can get a full support.

This highlights the importance of political education around the ideas of human rights and many activists reflected that education about rights can be a powerful **mobilising tool**.

“ So I think one, if we understand a right as an entitlement, as something that you entitled to. I think... it's very important... people are entitled to certain things and if you [explain] that, that something is a need but [also] an entitlement ... It's much easier to speak to them ... **it's very much easier to mobilise them because people understand they have a right to this.**

This demonstrates that, for some activists, the language of rights has been influential in conscientising communities to action.

However, even if people know about their rights this does not mean that they will always feel able to use that knowledge to enforce their rights, underlining the need to do further education and mobilisation work.

“ **Our people know their rights but they don't use them**, they do not implement them at all. Sometimes you see that a person can get what they want but because, I don't know if they are scared or they're used to not obtaining things so they don't do anything. But with the awareness that we bring to them in our community they are now able to fight and stand up for their rights.

For other activists, the language of rights was most useful when speaking to those in power as a way to make them act because the constitution compels the state to act in certain ways.

“ **We've never really used... the language of rights** we've, we've used it more as a reference point to a constitutional right... we would use it more often when we speak to policymakers... When we speak in the media and, and to be absolutely honest... **we see it as a way of making political actors feel guilty**... we think the **guilt amongst politicians are a good thing because it makes them act**, it makes them do something but otherwise they wouldn't but because they feel guilty. So, in that respect we would often reference the rights and the constitution in talking about the lived experience of some people because it's easier for them to kind of either visualise yes, there is that document and so the state has an obligation.

While many activists spoke about the importance of right-based mobilisation, there were also important discussions around the **limitations of rights**. When activists spoke about this they reflected on the limits that both legislative and constitutional rights place on the realisation of human rights.



*I see water as life... you see water as business. **It is your right to make business out of water. It is my right also to drink water to survive.** Now that's where you find conflict comes in. They brought the police to stop me to drink water and those who are making money out of water, they've got police on their side. They've got army on their side, they've got dogs, rubber bullets, tear gasses ... And it depends with the judges, the magistrates which side that they taking. Are our magistrates, our judges, pro-capitalist or they are pro-socialist? ... Because **the interpretation of the rights was made by people who wanted to control the world.***

As this activist highlights, constitutional and legislative rights often, ultimately, protect the interests of the state and capital over the interest of the people even using force, like the police, to protect the rights of capital over the rights of people.

This debate and critique over the use of rights-based mobilisation is not new. It is what makes the use of rights a **double-edged sword**. While it can advance struggle in certain ways it can also restrain our demands when limited to only what the current legislative or constitutional framework allows for.

For instance, when rights campaigns become entangled in legal processes, this can have both positive and negative consequences. In some cases, it can unite different communities and organisations together who may not agree on everything but can agree on the importance of rights and provide tools to fight for them.



*It [rights based-campaigning] potentially provides activism a broad coalition with a coherence around a set of demands ... if we are going to put forward a different set of action[s], a different economy, what is it that we are going to utilise to give coherence and legitimacy and direction... it [rights] can do that, Rights place obligations on other actors and it can do that and is also an important thing in understanding in dealing with policy.*

However, once they become involved in legal processes, a negative consequence of rights-based campaigns is that they can often **demobilise** communities as they wait for long and drawn-out court proceedings to conclude. Another danger can be the extent to which struggles become more about what can be won in court than what can be won on the streets. This can sometimes result in the struggle deferring to the expert knowledge of lawyers rather than a focus on building working class mobilisation alongside legal proceedings.

For this reason, many activists emphasised the importance of **giving rights radical content**.



*The right to vote, it was not always there, it was won through a struggle. The right to houses, it was always a struggle. Today the issue of energy justice is forcing itself more and more on the agenda right and it was not there before the working class have to fight for it and for as long as they can defend it, then that will be the right.*

I think the, the point about rights is that they're only as powerful as you give them content to be.

What is reflected here is that the rights we have today are the product of past struggles. These rights were not simply given to us. Therefore, rights-based campaigns are likely to be most successful when they do not only consider what can be won immediately through the existing rights framework but also when they encourage us to think about what we want human rights to mean. This suggests that imagining what we want human rights to mean is just as important as their use as a practical tool within struggle.

## Prospects for narrative change using human rights

This research has identified the dominance of **conservative economic narratives** and demonstrated how these are portrayed in the media.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, we have demonstrated how this influences some of the public's thinking about the economy.<sup>7</sup> However, the conservative economic narrative does not universally dominate public perceptions about the economy. There is a strong belief that inequality is too high and it is the responsibility of government to do something about it. As a result, there is widespread support for interventions like a basic income grant.

<sup>6</sup> Dor, L. Matlala, B. & Runciman, C. (2022). *Shifting the narrative about human rights and the economy: Media analysis of the basic income grant and the public sector wage bill*. Centre for Social Change, University of Johannesburg.

<sup>7</sup> Runciman, C., Dor, L. & Matlala, B. (2022). *Shifting the narrative about human rights and the economy: The public's views on the economy*. Centre for Social Change, University of Johannesburg.

But this support is weakened by concerns about the feasibility of the grant. Despite the advances made by activists, the media is still dominated by narratives that serve to persistently remind the public and policy-makers that there is a “shortage of state resources” and an “impending debt crisis” should the state “spend too much money”. Similarly, we see how the conservative economic narrative frames public sector wage bill as a risk to the economy.

Activists agree that while using rights-based campaigns may have limitations, it is nonetheless a powerful mobilising tool. This raises a range of questions about the prospects of using human rights to advance narrative change about the economy.

**Whose narrative are we trying to change?**

**What narratives do we want to change?**

**What platforms should we use to change the narrative?**

**Can we use human rights to reframe the narrative on the economy?**

**What are the practical steps that we need to take to build a project to change the narrative?**

**The answer to these questions lies in the hands of the activists who are willing to create counter-narratives and drive the process of narrative change.**

