

Overcoming trauma and woundedness for institutional and societal success

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Billions of rands are invested annually in developmental projects, but the paradox is that we still seem to make little progress or even go backwards. To move forward, we have to address the trauma and woundedness that affects us as individuals, institutions and society.

This was argued by clinical psychologist Nomfundo Mogapi, the executive director at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR), at the Trialogue Business in Society Virtual Conference 2020, where she was a keynote speaker

“For the past few decades there has been so much investment into development – you can’t fault our society or government. Some of you (conference delegates) have invested so much money into education, health and training teachers,” she said. “But the paradox is that the more investment we give, the less the return. If we can begin to unpack this paradox and the things that contribute to it, perhaps we can start to ensure that we have a functional society and functional institutions.”

A major contributor to the current dysfunctional situation is that we have not fully understood the extent, level and depth of trauma and wounding that exist in our society. As a result, we have not fully appreciated the kind and level of investment required to address this problem. It is only when we have a full appreciation of this woundedness that we can ensure we have a successful society and institutions – and that developmental projects yield the results we want.



Nomfundo Mogapi

“While we say we want functional institutions and a functional society, thriving corporations and successful developmental projects, we are actually operating within a wounded context. If we do not fully appreciate this context, we will continue to be surprised at how difficult the development work is and why we are not achieving the results that we want.”

Individual wounding

Wounding appears and impacts our society at a number of levels, said Mogapi. Being fully aware of the situation is the first step in addressing this challenge.

“It is astounding how much wounding has been experienced by individuals in this country. The challenge is not as much the extent of the wounding but how asleep we are to our pain. And even when we are awake to it, we don’t do anything. We are a society that doesn’t deal with our wounds. So in our institutions and developmental projects, we have highly wounded individuals. There is a powerful saying that if you don’t deal with your wounds you will bleed on the people that never caused the original injury.”

Family wounding

As if this is not enough, we have dysfunctional family situations. “Our work has shown that when your family environment is supporting and caring, the likelihood is that you have a higher level of resilience and capacity for dealing with the difficulties

around you. But the sad thing is that most of our families are themselves sources of pain and wounding; you just have to look at the gender-based violence statistics that we see in our society to appreciate how deep the crisis is in our country.”

Wounded institutions

In addition, we have wounded and wounding institutions. “We have done a lot of work to try and transform our institutions legally and in terms of policies, systems and procedures but we have not done enough to transform the mindsets of our institutions.”

For example, many school teachers and principals feel that the system is not supporting them. These institutions are still carrying the same mindset that created a lot of wounding in our society. There has not been a shift. When people enter these institutions, the wounding is perpetuated.

Communities in conflict

Furthermore, most developmental interventions take place within communities. The high level of fragmentation and conflict within these communities as a result of woundedness, however, means the beneficiaries are unable to take up many of the developmental programmes that are offered.

Wounded and wounding leadership

The people who are supposed to lead our institutions, corporates and developmental projects are not awake to their own trauma or wounding, or the wounding of society. Leaders themselves are likely to end up wounded or wounding.

“We’ve taken certain ways of interacting as normal, but they are interfering with our capacity to be functional. The current generation is carrying high levels of anger. The scary thing is that we are transferring this to the next generation. Our future leaders hold in their DNA the unresolved trauma that we are carrying, and it is embedded in our institutions.”

Covid-19 exacerbated this looming crisis and impacted us at a psychological level in ways that we have not fully appreciated.

“There has been a lot of talk about how Covid-19 hasn't affected us as badly as we thought at a health level, and that there have not been as many infections as we expected; but we have not fully appreciated the impact the pandemic has had at a psychological level in our country.”

Globally, the pandemic has contributed to isolation and loneliness, but given the lack of a societal and institutional safety net, as a result of our unresolved traumas prior to Covid-19, the psychological impact of Covid-19 was exacerbated here in South Africa. Danish citizens and institutions, for example, have bounced back swiftly because they can rely on centuries of trust-building between leaders and communities, government and society.

“We do not have this safety net and therefore the impact at an emotional level has been at a scale that we do not yet fully appreciate.”

Resilient leaders

Ideally, we want leaders who are focused, calm, hopeful and present. Who have dealt with their trauma and are ‘peace carriers’ with the capacity to contain their own emotional reactions when these are triggered, and who can contain other people’s reactions, too.

These leaders are in sharp contrast to ‘trauma carriers’, who are oblivious to their pain or do not deal with the trauma they feel. They might be capable, but their effectiveness is limited; when triggered, they are unable to deal with and contain their emotional reactions. The wound comes to the fore and the vision and purpose retreat.

“If we don’t deal with this wounding, no matter how much investment we give to development, whether it is education, economics, justice or community development, those investments will come up against that wounded context. We will get the opposite of what we have invested in. We will be faced with the paradox.”

“In order to address this paradox faced by developmental practitioners in South Africa, we need to integrate this woundedness work in our interventions so that we have resilient leaders who are effective.”

Practical strategies

Mogapi admitted that many of her discussion points were ‘gloomy’, but also emphasised that much could be done to improve the situation and to ensure that when money is invested in development, it yields better results.

Integration in strategy, policy, programming and practice: Most of our leaders will, realistically, not go for therapy or counselling. Accordingly, we need to find creative ways to integrate wounding work into our policies, programming and practices. For example, a highly contested area that creates a lot of anxiety is performance management – there is a lot of anxiety about performing in our country and a lot of wounding is related to that. This should be well-managed. Mogapi also reminded delegates of simple but effective behaviours such as acknowledging and thanking all levels of staff.

Invest in coaching for your leaders and in transforming the culture and institutions that you operate in.

Community interventions: Don’t just parachute a developmental programme into a community, but integrate healing and emotional resilience building practices within those communities too.

Invest in early childhood and parenting interventions if possible, because when families are functional, resilience is higher.

Coordination, synergy: We need to invest in the mental health and psychosocial support sector and encourage coordination between stakeholders. Mental health practitioners can educate and train development programme staff. Practitioners’ professional knowledge and expertise can make a difference, not only in one-on-one counselling and therapy, but also in the larger societal processes.

Quoting psychiatrist and author Sandra Bloom, who has done a great deal of work on the issue of collective trauma, Mogapi reminded the delegates: “If the wound is untransformed, the history will keep on repeating itself, and every time it does, the cost is higher.”

She concluded her presentation: “I want to argue that investing in our wounding, dealing with this paradox, is about investing in our human capital and it is a crucial component of a functioning society and functioning institutions. This is even more so in a post-Covid-19 society”

Nomfundo Mogapi is the executive director at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR). She is also the lead of the Mental Wellness Initiative (MWI), a registered NPO of a consortium of mental wellness practitioners, which was started in order to respond to the high need for coordinated mental wellness in a post-Covid-19 South Africa. CSVR is the secretariat of MWI. Ms Mogapi has more than 20 years’ experience in the psychosocial field across Africa, 16 of these have been in senior leadership and management. Ms Mogapi previously worked as the head of psychosocial interventions at CSVR and as the director of the South African Institute for Traumatic Stress.

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