THE NATION BRAND AND ITS STRATEGIC REFLECTION

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In October 2016, the University of Pretoria, in association with Brand South Africa, hosted the first *Nation Brand University Dialogue*. For most participants, this was a rare opportunity to interrogate the need for a nation brand, assess the factors that shape it, examine the reciprocal effect between nation branding and the policy environment, and consider its potential limitations. From the ten presentations and extended panel discussion presented during the *Dialogue*, we chose to include five in this special focus because each reviewed a specific strategic aspect of nation branding.

Branding as a concept is often restricted to the world of business and the marketing of products and services. But while promoting a nation's brand does rely on marketing tactics, the political scientists studying branding acknowledge that its purpose is far broader. From a strategic perspective, nation branding seeks to grow a positive predisposition towards a country's principles, policies and products, which, in turn, is used to leverage a nation's soft power authority to advocate for specific objectives in the world's centres of power.

In this compilation the theoretical precepts that guide nation branding are explored by three authors — *Mzukisi Qobo's* article pinpoints nation branding as the key component of a nation's foreign policy efforts; *Garth le Pere's* analysis probes the broader application of these theories, while *Nadia Kaneva's* closing piece critiques much of this theory by referencing the Kosovo and Ukrainian experiences. The three authors unpack how local and international preferences shape the national image, how this image is the foundation of Joseph Nye's (2004) concept of soft power, and how marketing executives work the image to fulfil political and commercial goals respectively — albeit from different

global and disciplinary perspectives.

These authors remind readers, using Simon Anholt's (2007) terminology, that a nation's brand or image is shaped by its own citizens' lived experiences — in essence, they charge those who define the brand with capturing the hearts and minds of investors, policymakers, and citizens. A nation's brand, they say, should ideally help a government lobby for solutions to assuage its citizens' safety, economic and development concerns in a globalised world characterised by rising inequality. Studies also prove that domestic policy and its implementation directly influence the nation's image and this is a thread that is explored in each of these articles. *Qobo's* article, for instance, introduces this relationship by citing the National Development Plan's (2012) belief that domestic policy should drive the country's foreign policy — at least in South Africa's regional dealings.

To help contextualise the internal or lived realities that largely frame and determine the credibility of the brand, we included two articles to quantify South Africa's key economic and spatial dynamics. One unpacks the complex nature of social cohesion and its effect on domestic policymaking and the national identity, and another delves into the intricacies behind the rising demands of urbanisation and its effect on the larger cities' ability to govern and promote physical and economic well being.

There is currently no standard index that is able to measure the concept of social cohesion within the South African context, largely because no adequate definition of the concept exists. For this reason *Lindokuhle Njozela, Ingrid Shaw* and *Justine Burns* sought to develop a method to identify and trace any emerging trends by dividing social cohesion into three variables — trust, identity, and inequality — and, using related survey questions, aggregating the responses received from two nationally-run statistical studies. They chose the Afrobarometer survey data and four Waves of the National Income Dynamic Study (NIDS) panel data, both of which are large-scale, existing datasets that are collected regularly. Based on their interpretation of this data, the authors find that a nation's social cohesion seems to be linked to its citizens' economic prosperity. Furthermore, they find that the higher the levels of education, *per capita* income, employment and municipal competence (especially at the provincial level) the more citizens seem to trust and respect others and the more willing they are to act on perceived inequality. Respondents apparently embodied the very essence

of a common humanity personifying the concept of *Ubuntu*, a key pillar of South Africa's nation brand. For this reason the authors suggest that policymakers and branding officials promote policies that grow economic prosperity and social cohesion at home if the country's plan is to champion peace, development and global stability beyond its borders.

One drawback of the proposed social cohesion index is its inability to delve into a narrower, more local dynamic. To try and provide readers with a glimpse of some of the contextual issues academics study at a local level, *George Angelopulo* outlines the key factors that drive social and economic development at the city-level. He then compares South Africa's major cities with those located across the continent and further afield in an effort to track trends that South Africa's branding initiative can learn from and employ.

Angelopulo notes that cities are often able to offer a more manageable context to appreciate a country's dynamics and development. For instance, one can assess how quickly cities are able to raise investment for locally managed infrastructure development projects. In addition, academics can study a city's liveability index, its economic status, its ability to attract tourism and its ability to provide residents with safety and security. In many ways, as *Angelopulo* states, a person's perception of a city influences their perceptions of the nation as a whole.

The African continent is experiencing rapid urbanisation and the key to understanding how well local governments manage this burgeoning growth lies in how inclusively they control this phenomenon. To measure this, *Angelopulo* looked at factors such as municipal governance, economic well-being and growth, business friendliness, urbanisation, physical connectivity and the ability to travel, infrastructure, electronic connectivity, and development in general. Between 2011 and 2013 South African cities showed increasing potential to be more inclusive. However, and coinciding with a global economic downturn, these indicators fell in 2015, leaving scholars to locate the country's better performing cities in the medium-low inclusivity range.

In essence, *Angelopulo* reinforces Njozela *et al's* findings, arguing that if governments can address problems at the local level (that is, the city-level) then this development will filter up to the national level and effect the country's international image. Such development would include building infrastructure and institutions such as schools and tertiary education facilities, housing, medical personnel and facilities, sewage, electrical, telecommunication facilities and road networks. He

also warns that governments who are not able to keep pace with urbanisation will exacerbate the city's (and therefore the nation's) levels of inequality and have a deleterious effect on the youth. This gap will potentially increase the number of service delivery protests, perceptions of crime and general poverty that will strain the country's social bonds and likely undermine the nation's brand and image.

Given South Africa's *apartheid* history, it seems only natural that the country would want to become the standard bearer for all things inclusive. Since Nelson Mandela's administration, South Africans have wrapped themselves in his 'rainbow nation' metaphor — a country that respects the distinct racial and ethnic identities that live within its borders while working together to deliver the country into the 21st century. The hope was that the country's political miracle would translate into an economic boon that would bridge the political and social divides. The country's political architects also hoped to replicate this strategy on the international level through its commitment to human rights using the concept of *Ubuntu* (humanity) and *Batho Pele* (putting people first), and pursuing peaceful development and global stability.

But *Qobo* and *Le Pere* question whether this brand is still relevant some 23 years later. Through their respective assessments of foreign policy both authors question the veracity of the current political leadership and whether its intent is to help solve global problems or secure its own personal interests.

Le Pere asserts that South Africa's brand and image was shaped by the country's political history and the Constitution that underpins the political system. He further reminds us that the country's image must match its domestic landscape — that actions and rhetoric must be consistent for South Africa to capitalise on its moral and political currency. In his assessment of South Africa's regional diplomatic efforts, *Qobo* also notes that the country's actions lead international actors to perceive it as a bully who uses its membership of various forums to secure its own narrow interests instead of leveraging its influence for the greater good of the continent. *Le Pere* agrees, noting that South Africa's foreign policy conduct has eroded its moral moorings in favour of a crude instrumentalist approach to international relations. *Le Pere's* study further documents this drift drawing on the White Paper on South Africa's Foreign Policy (2011). His analysis suggests that the country has "not lived its nation brand and identity in its external conduct", for while the country professes to pursue an Africa-centric agenda, its domestic and

international actions reflect a rather inconsistent story.

It is this inconsistency between the lived experience and the brand that *Nadia Kaneva* assesses. She explores how, theoretically, branding can be used to, as Anderson (1983) described it, "(re)construct nations as 'imagined communities'" and forge internal unity in a socially diverse nation. In successful cases, such as Canada (Potter 2009), the effort to establish a national identity has reconstructed everything from a respect for cultural norms, to a prosperous political economy, to the ideal of democratic governance. However, these noble goals can be limited and even subverted if the branding exercise is too outwardly focused and market-driven. *Kaneva* illustrates how, for example, the foreign media's need to bolster its own bottom line led marketing agencies to fudge Kosovo's brand into one that contradicted the lived experience of the nation. Therefore, instead of pioneering a path towards greater social cohesion, the resulting brand and its inconsistency sparked renewed ethnic nationalism.

Given their respective analyses the contributors' offer branding officials and scholars a number of general observations. For instance, the branding effort should:

— maintain a flexible approach that can adapt to the uncertainties of the domestic and international policymaking process;

— monitor the country's political temperature and brief political leaders on the affect their actions can and do have on the nation's domestic and international goals;

— seek to define your own nation before others shape it for you — if left to others they will likely project a negative or false image;

— recognise how essential city-level branding is, but also realise that each individual effort needs to be coordinated on a national level;

— appreciate that while developing a nation brand can produce internal social cohesion, if the end result negates the country's lived experience it may simply deepen existing social divisions; and above all,

— if your goal is to promote the virtues of social cohesion through the nation brand, then every effort must be made to build a firm economic foundation at home first.

And while these authors do raise several interesting questions there are a few that merit further analysis. For instance, how do elections and

party systems affect the nation brand and a country's ability to promote democracy and peace inside and outside its own borders?; how is business challenged by upholding a national brand?; and how can art and cultural relations more broadly help to win the hearts and minds of those at home and abroad?

In South Africa the current 'rainbow nation' metaphor that is still an implied part of South Africa's nation brand does not match the lived experiences of its society. As *Qobo* and *Le Pere* have painstakingly pointed out, South Africa's actions have been inconsistent (and often contradictory) to its rhetoric. They cite the often violent incidents against immigrants from across the continent, rising inequality that has resulted in growing social unrest, and increased perceptions of crime which, as Njozela *et al* point out, shape social divisiveness — the very antithesis of what the nation's brand is hoping to convey and promote. And as *Angelopulo* indicates, the country's current inability to manage urban-isation means inequality will soar, effecting the younger generation's ability to access essential services such as quality education and health care let alone find or create their own employment prospects. Further, the inability of the government to provide political stability amidst increasing protest activity — especially against the government's shaky political and economic management, rumours of political factionalism, and repeated calls on the system to hold itself accountable and control corruption — instigates a counter-narrative to the country's brand. This, as *Kaneva* points out, risks deepening South Africa's social divisions and does not bode well for those charged with promoting the country abroad.

References

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