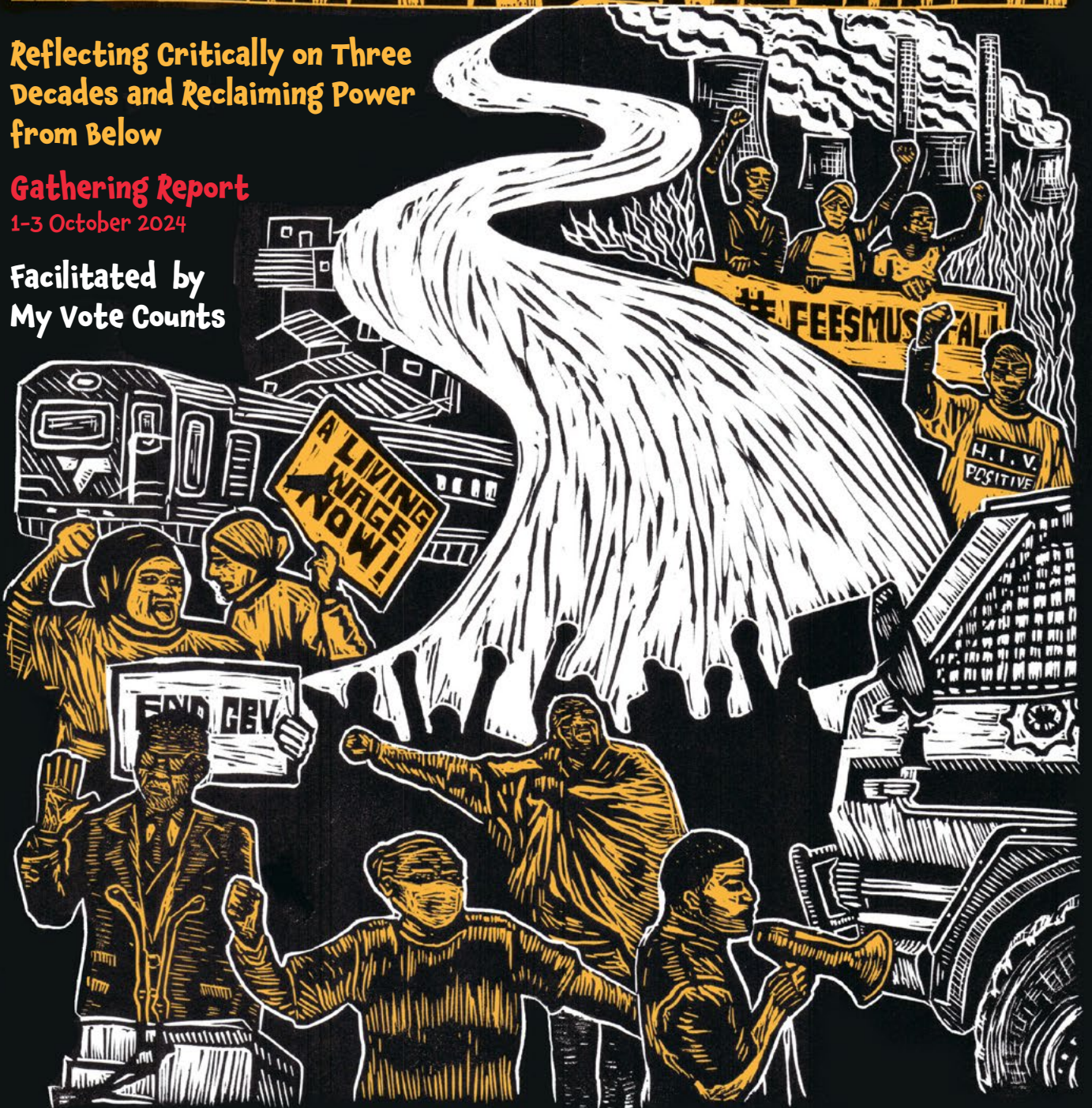


# 30 YEARS OF DEMOCRACY

Reflecting Critically on Three  
Decades and Reclaiming Power  
from Below

Gathering Report  
1-3 October 2024

Facilitated by  
My Vote Counts





MY VOTE  
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# 30 Years of Democracy Gathering

Reflecting Critically  
on Three Decades and  
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Below

## Conference Report

Facilitated by My Vote Counts  
1-3 October 2024

Compiled by Elisha Kunene

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# PART I FOREWORD

Convening  
Organisation:



MY VOTE  
COUNTS

The tenets of inclusive public debate and political contestation are broadly accepted as cornerstones of democracy. Oftentimes, however, democratic processes feel like little more than a cycle of reflections about reflections about reflections, discourses on discourse, and talks about talking.

This culture is certainly not absent in the civil society, a space credited with achieving a democratic miracle by bringing about an unprecedented shift from an authoritarian, ethno-nationalist minority rule to a functioning, fully-fledged constitutional democracy.

While it may have seemed to happen overnight, those who consider themselves part of civil society (including all parts of society outside the formal mechanisms of the state) know too well that South Africa's democracy was not easily achieved. It was not the result of a single, flash-in-the-pan moment, nor was it divine intervention granted by any messianic figure or group. Instead, it was the sustained effort of a wide array of groups committed to the cause of freedom.

Today, there is often a tendency to view civil society with despondency or resignation, sensing that the current formations do not measure up to their predecessors. This, in turn, breeds increasing frustration, distrust, and disunity among those who insist on keeping civil society vibrant.



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And yet, while we see this crisis and a wave of demobilization, we also see that the so-called “miracle” of democracy has left much to be desired. Abahlali baseMjondolo, a prominent grassroots civil society organization with the largest membership of any voluntary organization in South Africa, advocates for urban informal settlement dwellers, particularly in Durban. Recently, they described the 2024 moment leading up to the election as an opportunity to reflect on “30 years of unfreedom.”

Not only in South Africa, but often globally, democracy stands for merely the hollow formal structures of electoral politics. My Vote Counts has long argued that counting votes alone is insufficient for justice, freedom, and true democracy, and that formal electoralism is but one means of protecting the transformative constitutional vision South Africans desire and deserve.

My Vote Counts’ recent 30 Years of Democracy Gathering aimed to bring together voices—diverse and fractured as they may be—who continue the struggle, refusing to retreat and calling for a more inclusive reflection of true South African civil society.

They look to transcend professionalisation and bureaucratization, philanthropy and welfare gestures, discourse theatre, and formal technocracy, in favour of substantive equality, justice, and freedom.

**Below:** Voices from the frontline of activism and civic engagement





As My Vote Counts, we do not see ourselves as leaders or gatekeepers but envision playing a supportive role; platforming and convening thinkers, activists, organisers, and fighters who protect democracy, without expecting easy victories or simple questions.

The Gathering held at Constitution Hill took on the challenge of convening to reflect honestly on what democracy means in South Africa and beyond. This report offers a brief reflection of the vigour, passion, and depth of those discussions.

A note on this report's style: it is not intended as a manifesto or set of resolutions with a path to emancipation decided after a few discussions. There are no grand declarations or strategies, but neither is it a minute-by-minute transcription of contributions from only those most comfortable with the microphone.

Rather, it's a collection of perspectives that ground our reality, reflecting the challenges and questions we must continually address.

Our hope is that these notes, gathered from plenary discussions and breakaway groups, will be valuable for activists committed to educating, advocating, litigating, and striving for genuine democratic outcomes. Many conference participants noted that spending days reflecting together in one space was both exhausting and invigorating. At a minimum, the renewal of our fighting spirit is something we can hope to gain from honest, justice-focused conversation.

We hope that what is captured here carries forward the fire felt by all in the venue. My Vote Counts is honoured to have played a role in gathering such a remarkable group of citizen leaders.

**Above:** A space for critical reflection, bold ideas, and collective action.

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## ABOUT THE GATHERING

2024 marked 30 years since the formalisation of South Africa's democracy. A moment that was brought forth by popular and democratic forms of organisation in communities and workplaces. It was catalysed by the formation of student movements, the trade union movement, civic and faith-based organisations, and communities that directly confronted the apartheid state.

The moment is remembered by our first democratic election in 1994 where political power was transitioned from one elite to another. The dawn of democracy brought the promise of a more just and equal society.

**Below:** Engaging conversations on democracy and power at the Gathering.

Thirty years later, millions are excluded from employment, housing, safe communities, access to water and electricity, quality education and health care, and from having enough food to live a decent life.

Our tradition of popular and democratic organisation evolved in many ways after 1994. Significant segments of the Black trade union movement were integrated into the governing African National Congress (ANC), while many social movements emerged to demand their constitutional rights.



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However, as the social crisis deepened and the state deepened its commitment to a failed economic project, society became largely demobilised. Further, many have abandoned trust in democratic institutions and have retreated to forms of narrow nationalism. But are the escalating social crises and the demobilisation of society a failure of the democratic system?

- Is our democracy one that can work to benefit everyone, especially the excluded?
- How do we build on our tradition of popular and democratic forms of organisation effectively?
- How can people use the next phase of our democracy effectively?
- What are the possibilities of reclaiming democracy?

**Below:** The Gathering was enriched by a dynamic range of speakers, activists, and thinkers.



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## THEMES

The Programme was spread out across three days, each with an overarching theme:

- **Reflecting on 30 Years of Democracy**
- **Reimagining Democracy**
- **Reclaiming Democracy from Below**

## BREAKAWAY SESSIONS

Each thematic discussion was followed by breakaway sessions where, in small groups, conference participants were able to take control of the conversations and make their voices heard. Far too often, civil society conversations operate in a top-down manner, where activists and leaders are invited to form an audience and absorb the 'wisdom' of all-knowing panellists. A culture of deference to these public interest micro-celebrities stifles meaningful dialogue. It also discourages participation and makes most documents emerging from such events artificial and unrepresentative. This Gathering looked to break with that tradition by letting the attendants break away from plenary and have discussions in small groups where every voice could be heard, and every issue could be placed on the agenda. Notes from these discussions have been merged into a Discussion Document, a collection of key points to guide our focus going forward.

**Stream recordings**



**Photo gallery**



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## PART II

# REFLECTING ON 30 YEARS OF DEMOCRACY

### EXAMINING DEMOBILISATION AND PATHWAYS FORWARD

After three decades of democracy, South Africa faces a persistent challenge: the demobilisation of civil society. The energetic, organised movements that characterised the anti-apartheid struggle have largely dissipated. This decline reflects the influence of neoliberal policies that have fragmented the economy and weakened structures that once supported collective action, such as unions and community organisations. As capital interests have transformed labour into more precarious, isolated forms, opportunities for solidarity have diminished, contributing to a political climate marked by resignation and disengagement.

*“It’s important to note that embracing neoliberalism was a policy choice. And alternative paths to development did exist.”*

*~ Dr Niall Reddy*

The dominance of the ANC is also a factor in this demobilisation. A “passive revolution” strategy has allowed the ruling party to incorporate oppositional forces, effectively neutralising independent movements and making it harder for citizens to challenge the status quo. This has led to diminished public trust, not only in the party itself but in democratic processes more broadly. As a result, many citizens feel that their participation in politics is futile, creating an environment where populism and defeatism can thrive.





## BARRIERS TO RECLAIMING POWER AND ORGANISING CIVIL SOCIETY

Key barriers to rebuilding collective action include fragmentation within civil society, often worsened by competition for limited resources. Many organisations work independently, lacking a shared, cohesive strategy to address systemic issues. The pervasive influence of neoliberalism has further isolated individuals and communities, reducing the potential for unified action and reinforcing the public's distrust in democratic mechanisms.

## MOVING FORWARD: STEPS TOWARD REMOBILISATION

To counteract demobilisation, civil society organisations must re-engage communities through both short-term initiatives that address immediate needs and longer-term strategies focused on structural change. Efforts should include advocating for basic resources, such as food security and healthcare, to build trust and meet essential needs, as well as fostering political consciousness and solidarity.

In closing, the path forward requires rethinking how civil society can rebuild democratic agency. Through more unified, grassroots-driven strategies, South African movements may begin to restore public trust and renew collective action. While the journey is challenging, a renewed focus on inclusive, community-led engagement is essential to reigniting democratic potential.

## NOTES FROM PLENARY DISCUSSION

Audience members contributed several thoughts on mobilising civil society. Suggestions included learning from past efforts, building political consciousness, and fostering “intentional solidarity” across movements. Several participants emphasized the importance of reclaiming grassroots structures and creating short-term programs to address community needs. Some spoke to the necessity of fostering revolutionary values within movements, as well as encouraging a return to community-led organizing as a means of regaining public trust and collective power.

“We tend to think of populist upsurges as challenges to the neoliberal social order, when, in fact, they are a symptom of demobilisation, and thus part and parcel of neoliberal hegemony.”

~ William Shoki

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# REIMAGINING DEMOCRACY

## POIGNANT REFLECTIONS ON DEMOCRACY

Yet, the point is made poignantly that in the disillusionment and disappointment of critical voices, reflections on 30 years of democracy often obscure just how horrific the earlier reality was. The horror of authoritarian rule that immediately preceded our first democratic election, with its brutality and oppressive infrastructure, was dismantled, giving way to peace, stability, and freedom in a commendable way.

Is it possible that by focusing on failures and problems, we trivialise the significant gains achieved by South African political society, the challenges overcome, and the lives improved? Are we in danger of minimizing and not appreciating what we have to be grateful for?

## APPRECIATING AND DEFENDING DEMOCRACY

It is indeed true that our 30 years of democracy represent a significant improvement over apartheid and white minority rule. We have known worse forms of tyranny. However, we can only appreciate, defend, and preserve our democratic present and future if we are able to analyse its nature and imagine the democratic society we wish and must continue to strive for.

**Below:** Engaging conversations on democracy and power at the Gathering.



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## REIMAGINING DEMOCRACY – NATIONAL UNITY

It is for this reason that we are forced to look forward and backwards, inwards, and outwards, simultaneously, to confront the second key theme of the Gathering: reimagining democracy.

A major development from the recent election marked a historic shift in South African democracy: for the first time, the African National Congress (ANC), the ruling party and liberation movement, lost its electoral majority, falling below 50% of the vote. The ANC accepted the democratic outcome and began seeking coalition partners to form a government. In a surprising turn, the coalition partner turned out to be the Democratic Alliance (DA)—the ANC's sworn opposition and greatest challenger in the democratic era.

This unexpected alliance was justified by its proponents as necessary to form a "government of national unity" (GNU) to stabilize both the South African democratic project and the economy. However, during our discussions—particularly the first panel on Day Two—it was noted that South African civil society lacks experience in engaging with a government not centred on the ANC.

The circumstances under which a GNU would typically be formed—such as moments of national crisis, reconciliation, or broad-based consensus—were entirely absent in this case. Instead, the partnership between the ANC and DA was described as a "partnership of convenience" between two neoliberal entities, representing a relatively small segment of the population and formed without a popular mandate. Consequently, the so-called GNU was characterized as an elite pact, one that entrenches and perpetuates a dominant neoliberal hegemony.

This shift is already evidenced by the growing influence of South Africa's business community on government decision-making, while civil society remains fractured, ineffective, and disconnected. This reality presents a critical challenge: civil society must avoid defeatism and ideology-driven inertia. Instead, we must engage in a clear-eyed analysis of the current political structure, the widespread depoliticization, and the political alienation of the majority of South Africans.

Reimagining democracy as a tool for justice requires us to articulate the mechanisms of power as they exist while simultaneously clinging to imagination as a site of ongoing struggle. Without this dual approach, the possibility of a truly democratic South Africa remains out of reach.

*"The negotiated end to apartheid was about the same logic that continues (today); the restoration of profitability to an economy that was in crisis.. the main beneficiary of political realignment is basically those who own and run the economy"*

~ Mazibuko Jara

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## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

There are many perspectives that reinforce the need to appreciate what democratic achievements exist. A panel of progressive speakers and thinkers from Brazil, Mexico, and India shared their reflections on what democratic development has meant in their countries and what lessons South Africans can learn. India, one of the oldest democracies in the world with one of the oldest constitutions, has an origin story very similar to South Africa's own. Both embraced public interest legalism and judicial and constitutional activism in hopes of building a better society.

Over the 100 years of its constitution's existence, India has seen over a hundred amendments, showing the malleability of what is still considered a foundational text.

However, over the 100 years of its constitution's existence, India has seen over a hundred amendments, showing the malleability of what is still considered a foundational text. This has coincided with the state's descent through formally democratic means into increasingly repressive right-wing authoritarian ethno-nationalism, producing startling inequality, poverty, and subjugation of all but a relatively small, protected economic and cultural elite. There is no promise of a return to tolerance, equity, and inclusion in the foreseeable future. Here, we see a stark illustration of how things could be worse.

## REFLECTIONS FROM BRAZIL

From Brazil, we learn that even with a leftist government in power, the reality for many citizens can still be one of marginalization. The formal institutions of the state often have little impact on the lived experiences of large parts of society. People are not served by their democracy and can hardly access it. They are governed by forces unconcerned with the formal and often theoretical structures and norms that democracy espouses.

Our panellist began by saying, "I do believe democracy is worth defending". This stands in stark contrast to the South African context, where the conversation often starts with the question of what version of democracy we want to achieve. This highlights the vulnerability of democracy, which can be cyclical, volatile, and vastly varied in different contexts, even under a single government.

This teaches us to be selective about what we appreciate and what we problematise. It suggests that what we consider fragmentation, as opposed to unity, might be meaningful. Political communities in vastly different contexts, facing vastly different challenges and capacities, are forced to engage with their governments in very different ways. The traditional bases for organizing and building solidarity are increasingly inaccessible.



## FORMING SOLIDARITY

How do societies form solidarity, support, and a genuine commitment to the betterment of their neighbours when they cannot, and indeed should not, adopt a uniform approach or have a common identity or struggle? The singular evil of apartheid repression once served as an amalgamating condition for a vibrant and effective civil society movement. We cannot help but reflect on this constantly. How do we imagine potential tools for solidarity, organization, and resistance when we may never again sit under the same tent or on the same factory floor?

## LESSONS FROM VENEZUELA

From Venezuela, we observe the different ways in which decentralised participatory self-governance, communal economic production and grassroots democratic inclusion, parallel to the state rather than antagonistic towards it, have created potentials for development, upliftment, and enfranchisement. This has occurred even where political freedoms and unifying liberal principles are absent from the ruling system. However...

*"This communal power of the grassroots in Venezuela is not seen as a supplement to the state and to liberal democracy, it is seen as a total replacement of that. Ultimately, there can be no cohabitation of these two forces. Grassroots power from below aspires to and must necessarily displace the existing liberal bourgeois democratic state with something far more democratic" ~ Geo Mahar.*

**Above:** 30 years on—  
unpacking the complexities of  
democracy in South Africa.

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## LESSONS FROM PROMINENT HISTORICAL MOVEMENTS

Democracy, at its core, is about people's ability to determine and participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives. However, the freedoms that democracy offers are fragile and should never be taken for granted. They require constant defence to prevent being undermined. While some argue that democracy hasn't worked—citing persistent inequality, racism, and other systemic injustices—the real issue lies not in democracy itself but in the lack of power that people have to make it work for them. Too often, individuals are unable to leverage the system to address their needs.

**Below:**

Breaking silos:  
Building solidarity  
across movements  
and struggles.

The most essential driver of democracy is collective action. When people come together around shared problems and aspirations, they gain the power to make themselves heard. Democracy is not a passive system; it only happens when those excluded from decision-making develop and exercise their power to force their way into those spaces. At its ideal, democracy aspires to give everyone an equal say in decisions that affect them, though no country has fully realized this vision. A democracy's effectiveness can be measured by how many people are genuinely able to participate in decisions. After establishing democratic institutions, the system can only deepen and serve a broader base if people organize effectively and use their collective power. When democracy seems to fail, it is often because people lack the collective ability to make decisions that matter to them. Yet democracy's successes are evident, as seen in South Africa's ARV treatment campaigns, which have saved millions of lives through grassroots demands.



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In South Africa today, democracy works well for about one-third of the population, particularly those with formal incomes who are more likely to have their voices heard. For the remaining two-thirds, especially the poor, influencing decisions and gaining recognition is far more difficult. Wealthy individuals and businesses also engage in collective action, but their methods—such as sending emails or leveraging resources—contrast sharply with the popular mobilization that poor and working-class communities must rely on. This disparity highlights that the problem is not the democratic system itself, nor its rules or constitution, but rather the lack of power held by marginalized groups to influence outcomes like living wages or equitable access to resources.

Despite these challenges, the changing dynamics of party politics have created opportunities for empowerment. Competition between political parties can give citizens leverage, especially during elections, when politicians are more likely to listen to voter demands. A study across 12 countries demonstrated that citizen-led efforts to change policy were most effective when elections played a role in holding politicians accountable. This suggests that playing political parties against each other can be a valuable tool for civil society. Rather than seeking an entirely new political system, the focus should be on building “democracy from below,” ensuring that the existing system works for everyone by turning the promises of the Constitution into tangible realities.

The Trade Union (TU) movement offers valuable lessons on how collective action can shift power dynamics. In the 1970s, workers in South Africa were significantly less powerful than they are today. Through grassroots organizing and sustained efforts, they built a movement that eventually secured key victories from employers. While some dismiss such struggles for achieving only “small victories,” such as slight wage increases or marginally better working conditions, these gains are crucial. They prove to people that change is possible, and each success lays the groundwork for larger transformations. When people see that they can influence one issue, it inspires them to believe that they can effect broader change.

To strengthen democracy, it is essential to create conditions where everyone could engage in collective action. This is how aspirations are turned into real outcomes. The lessons of history and global movements affirm that even the smallest victories can build power and momentum, showing that democracy, when driven from below, can work for everyone.

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## CHALLENGING IN-GROUP DYNAMICS AND DOMINANCE

Reclaiming democracy also demands scrutiny of in-group versus out-group dynamics, particularly the dominance of certain voices within social movements and civic discourse. Key questions include:

- How do funding relationships influence organizational priorities and strategies?
- What roles do professionalization and bureaucratization play in shaping the dynamics between blue-chip NGOs and grassroots movements?
- Additionally, we must confront the co-optation of struggles by regressive forces. For instance, when disenfranchised groups express frustration about immigration or exploitative informal economies, how often do we dismiss their grievances as bigotry rather than engaging with their underlying concerns? Winning the hearts and minds of these communities requires empathy and inclusion, ensuring their struggles are not weaponised by reactionary agendas.

## EVOLVING TACTICS

A critical aspect of reclaiming Democracy from Below is reassessing tactics. While traditional methods such as mass marches and worker uprisings were historically effective, their relevance in contemporary contexts may vary. For some grassroots movements, these remain indispensable tools for resisting political disenfranchisement. However, recognizing that different circumstances require different approaches fosters flexibility and solidarity across movements.

Robust debate and diverse tactical experimentation are essential as we collectively strive for a shared goal of genuine democracy from below.



## INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE AND PRACTICALITY

The “Thirty Years of Democracy” Gathering, facilitated by My Vote Counts, took place from October 1–3, 2024, at the Women’s Jail in Constitution Hill, Johannesburg. It followed the Movement Caucus for Democracy on September 30, a complementary space aimed at deepening dialogue among grassroots movements and strategizing for the future of democracy in South Africa. Together, these gatherings reflected on South Africa’s democratic journey since 1994 and laid the groundwork for reclaiming democracy from a grassroots perspective.

The purpose of the Thirty Years of Democracy Gathering was to reflect on three decades of democracy, highlighting its shortcomings and exploring ways to reclaim it “from below.” Participants critically examined the state of democratic institutions, the erosion of trust in governance, and the rise of neoliberal policies that have worsened inequality. The Gathering emphasized the importance of reimagining democracy as a participatory and inclusive process, one that prioritises the needs of marginalized communities. It also aimed to equip grassroots movements with the tools and strategies necessary to deepen people’s power and drive systemic change.

The Movement Caucus for Democracy, held just before the main Gathering, focused on preparing for future political engagement, particularly the 2026 and 2029 elections. It provided a space to evaluate the state of civil society movements, develop a shared vision for participatory democracy, and strategize around building solidarity and accountability within and across organisations. The Caucus emphasized the urgency of reconnecting with communities and addressing the widespread disillusionment with democratic processes, proposing practical solutions to mobilize grassroots participation, and rebuilding trust.

*“We have to practice prefigurative politics... we must start by being democratic ourselves”*

~ Ruth Ntlokotse

Together, these events represented a call to action: to reclaim South Africa’s democracy through collective action, solidarity, and community-driven solutions. They underscored the need for a democracy that is not merely formal or symbolic but rooted in the lived realities and aspirations of all citizens, particularly those historically excluded from its benefits. By fostering dialogue and collaboration, the gatherings charted a path toward revitalizing democracy and ensuring its relevance for future generations.

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The purpose of this discussion document is to serve as a practical resource—clear, accessible, and useful for anyone engaging with the ideas discussed at the Gathering and beyond. It is not just a summary of the plenary discussions, but a tool designed to exist independently, distilling key ideas and insights into a format that can inform and inspire action.

This document aims to equip activists, members of social movements, and civil society leaders with essential content and ideas that resonate with the challenges of our time and the principles of democracy. By presenting this material in an organised and readable way, it looks to offer something usable: content that can educate, prompt deeper thinking, and spark debates in spaces ranging from grassroots education programs to conversations aimed at persuading others of our progressive platform and vision.

In a moment where clarity is often scarce, we hope this document offers a structure and simplicity that makes complex issues easier to grasp and communicate.

## CONTEXT AND BEYOND

While this discussion document is designed to be valuable beyond the conference and to speak to those who were not represented, it is essential to acknowledge the context that shaped it. The rich conversations and engagement among the participants of the Gathering have deeply informed its content. These discussions helped reveal the challenges we face, highlighted the variation in our perspectives and approaches, and contributed invaluable lessons and strategies drawn from the diverse pro-democracy struggles represented at the conference.

However, it is important to recognize that this context, while enriching, is inherently incomplete. The conversations held—whether in breakaway sessions or plenary discussions—were snapshots of ongoing debates and reflections at a particular moment in time. They do not capture the full scope of experiences, voices, and contexts that shape the broader democratic public space.

Moreover, as we reflect on democracy and its governance, we must remind ourselves that formal, organised civil society—be it non-profits, activists, or progressive movements—represents only a fraction of what constitutes civil society at large. Civil society encompasses all formations and associations outside formal government. This reminder challenges us to go beyond our immediate contexts and to ensure that the issues and ideas discussed in this document are not only relevant but also bold enough to imagine the possibility of a different world.

*“..how do we go from social movements to political power in a way that maintains integrity, but where are we willing to lose integrity because this idealism is what is going to kill the left?”*

~ Dr Sithembile Mbete

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By situating the document in this context, we aim to honour the contributions of those gathered while ensuring its relevance to a much wider audience. The goal is to distil these discussions into ideas that inspire, educate, and challenge others to take forward the work of building democratic futures.

Our struggles MUST Be Grounded and Contextual. But Whose Context Matters?

This section explores the vital role of context in fostering understanding, solidarity, and effective democratic discourse.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

Context shapes our understanding of where conversations come from, what people value, and how politics manifests in daily life. For many, politics isn't abstract—it determines whether families can access justice, meet basic needs, and enjoy the rights that democracy promises yet often fails to deliver.

At the Gathering, participants shared diverse challenges to democratic ideals faced by their movements and communities nationwide. Their perspectives highlighted the importance of learning not just from our own struggles, but from others' experiences too. This exchange of perspectives offers a powerful way to build solidarity and shared understanding, especially in times when many feel disconnected and powerless.

Context illuminates the structural barriers that block full democratic participation. By engaging with these realities, we discover both our common ground and the unique challenges others face, deepening our understanding of the work ahead.

As we consider these challenges, we must acknowledge our different contexts. When we engage with others—whether teaching, debating, or organising—we should create space for them to share their experiences and challenges. This openness allows conversations to develop meaningfully. It's also crucial for democratic discourse, which thrives on mutual understanding rather than mere self-assertion.

*“When democracy arrived, my father told me, ‘Learn to swim, because now we will have a house with a pool.’” “Twenty years later, I inherited the same shack we lived in back then.”*  
~ Thapelo Mahopi

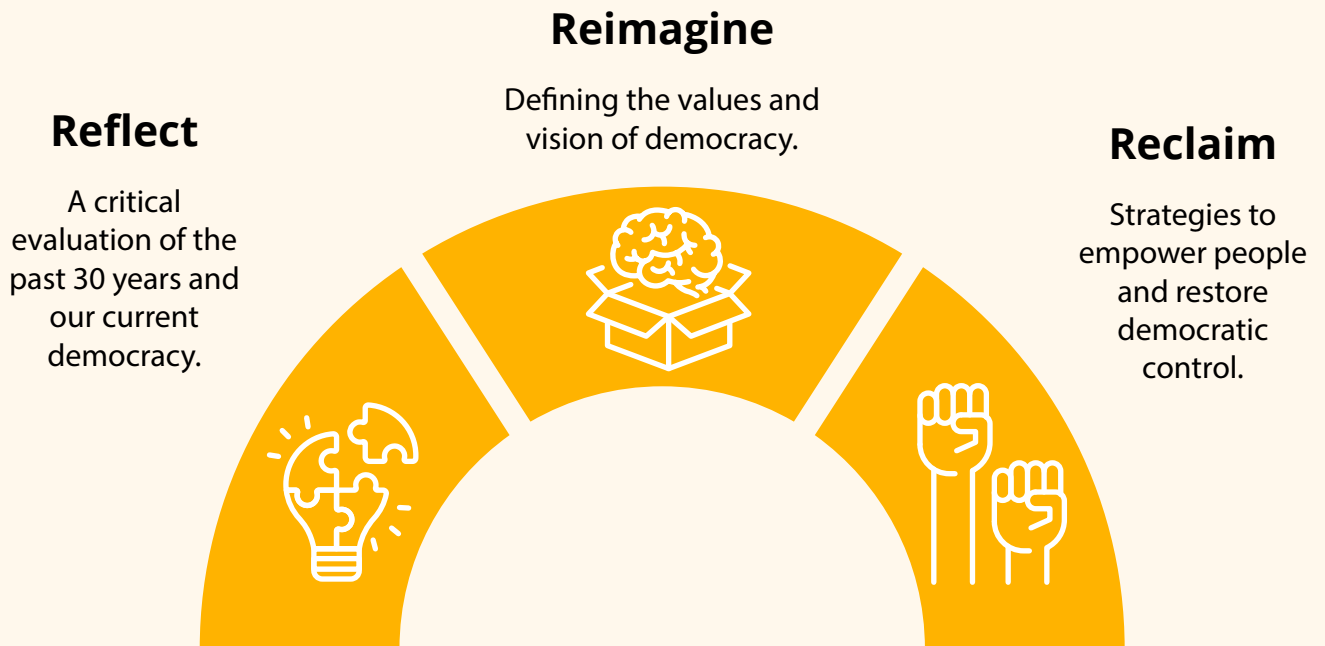
While it is essential to ground our struggles and strategies within the unique contexts of our communities, it is equally important to develop a shared understanding of the broader historical conjuncture and political terrain. The democratic project in South Africa does not exist in isolation—it is shaped by global economic trends, the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, and the shifting dynamics of power within the state and civil society. Recognizing these shared realities allows movements to anchor their actions not just in local circumstances but in the wider forces that influence them.

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At the Gathering, participants emphasized that while context reveals the diversity of challenges and opportunities, it also offers a foundation for solidarity. Understanding the structural barriers to democratic participation and the socio-economic systems that perpetuate inequality enables us to find common ground. By situating local struggles within this larger framework, we can better align our efforts and strategies to confront systemic issues collectively.

A shared understanding of the historical conjuncture—the intersection of political, social, and economic forces at this moment—is crucial for identifying opportunities for progressive action. The political terrain, marked by growing disillusionment with democratic institutions, demands an urgent response from movements to reimagine democracy and rebuild trust. By engaging with these shared realities, we can develop cohesive strategies that honour diverse contexts while advancing a unified vision for democracy that prioritizes equity and inclusion.

This interplay between the local and the broader context is not a contradiction but a strength. It challenges movements to be grounded yet visionary, to respect diversity while striving for collective action. In fostering a shared understanding, we strengthen our capacity to confront challenges with clarity and solidarity, ensuring that our democratic aspirations are not fragmented but amplified through collective purpose.



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## KEY QUESTIONS

- **Reflecting on the past 30 years is as important and urgent as ever. As we examine our democracy and its challenges, several key themes and questions appear. These provide a framework for understanding our current position and the necessary actions ahead:**

### **What is the state of our democracy today?**

- How have the past three decades shaped people's experiences?
- What explains the declining participation and faith in democratic processes?

### **What political and historical forces have shaped our democracy?**

- Which developmental decisions led to our current democratic state?
- Can we still influence, resist, or change these forces?

### **What is the state of civic movements in democratic spaces?**

- Why is civil society more fragmented than before?
- How can we rebuild collective power and solidarity?

### **What is the role of introspection within social movements?**

- Are movements ready to examine their own capabilities and conduct?
- How does internal accountability strengthen movements' ability to hold the state accountable?

### **How do we assess our current condition?**

- Which internal and external challenges must we address to create spaces where democracy can thrive?

These themes lay the groundwork for deeper discussions, promoting both critical analysis and self-reflection as movements tackle democratic challenges.

- **Reimagining democracy requires more than reflection—it demands active engagement with urgent, challenging questions:**

### **What is the democracy we want?**

- What was the democracy we were promised?
- What is democracy's true promise, and where has it fallen short?

### **How do we define and reclaim key democratic principles?**

- What is the real meaning of terms enshrined in our constitutional documents and civic culture?
- How can we confront historical forces like neoliberalism, demobilization, and marginalization that have created second-class citizens?

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### **What tools, protections, and guarantees should a functional democracy offer?**

- Which institutions, norms, and resources make democracy thrive?
- How do we measure these democratic elements in our present reality?

### **What forms of organising and solidarity have been most effective?**

- What can we learn from South Africa's progressive and vibrant civil society movements?
- How do past efforts and global examples shape our understanding of effective advocacy and solidarity?

### **How do we recommit to the belief that a different world is possible?**

- How does our vision of democracy differ from today's reality?
- What actions and commitments will bridge this gap and renew faith in the democratic project?

Imagining and defining the democracy we seek isn't merely an intellectual exercise—it's a commitment to action, an affirmation that a better world is possible.

## **■ RECLAIMING DEMOCRACY FROM BELOW**

If we can reimagine our democracy, we can revive it. A genuine commitment to democracy from below—beyond mere electoral formalism—requires reclaiming this ideal through deliberate resistance and collective action. This raises critical questions:

### **What does resistance mean across different sectors of society?**

- How do communities, movements, and organisations define and practice resistance in their specific contexts?
- Which methods and strategies can be shared or adapted across sectors to strengthen our common struggle?

### **What tools and strategies should we unite around?**

- Which tactics and approaches can bring progressive movements together in collective action?
- How do we identify and amplify approaches that effectively challenge systems of oppression and exclusion?

### **Who comprises our broad network?**

- Which forces and organisations are our natural allies in the struggle for democracy from below?
- How do we balance collaboration with maintaining independence when values or approaches differ?

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### **When should we exclude forces that conflict with our values?**

- How do we handle groups that threaten to water down progressive politics under the guise of unity or formal progress?
- When should we choose competition over collaboration, and how do we manage these dynamics?

### **How do we reclaim democracy from below?**

- How can movements collaborate to build a democracy rooted in people's needs and aspirations?
- Who are our allies in this struggle, and what role must each of us play?

Reclaiming democracy transcends resistance—it demands building solidarity, defining shared goals, and confronting forces that undermine true democratic participation. This work requires courage and clarity, alongside an unwavering belief in the transformative power of collective action .

## ■ **SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES AND INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS**

- 1. Challenges of Co-optation and Entrenched Power Structures:** Local political engagement faces the risk of co-optation. To counter this, communities must set clear, locally driven priorities. At a broader level, movements must challenge elite, neoliberal agendas that marginalize working-class and vulnerable groups.
- 2. Barriers to Political Representation:** Structural inequalities in service delivery—as seen in Cape Town's stratified services—undermine democracy, especially in marginalized communities. Meaningful representation and inclusion require comprehensive legal and institutional reforms.
- 3. Challenges of Dependency and Demobilisation:** Over-reliance on provisions such as the Social Relief of Distress grants can create dependencies. The focus should be on sustainable, community-led solutions that build resilience. Democracy extends beyond elections—lasting change requires sustained grassroots organising.

## ■ **POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND PEOPLE'S POWER**

- 1. Reimagining Political Engagement Beyond Donor Agendas:** Many South Africans feel disconnected due to corruption and broken promises. Campaigns should prioritize tangible, local issues, enabling communities to identify and address their priorities while building political confidence.
- 2. The 2024 Moment and Progressive Forces:** The ANC's declining support opens possibilities for progressive change. Yet the rise of conservative and neoliberal forces demands that progressives unite and offer a clear alternative. Understanding community disconnect is crucial for improving voter outreach and civic participation.

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- 3. Global Insights and Innovative Tactics:** Learn from Brazil and India's examples of consultative governance and diverse protest methods. Focus on practical goals: youth engagement, community connections, and locally responsive organising.
  - 4. Direct Engagement Across Ideologies:** Engage with opposing viewpoints, including Operation Dudula, to address economic justice and channel frustration productively.
  - 5. Expanding Political Consciousness Beyond Classes:** Acknowledge social movements' political nature beyond party lines. Build community consciousness without rigid ideological constraints.
  - 6. Defining Social Movements:** Clarify the meaning of "social movements" to align mission and tactics.

## ■ LEARNING FROM HISTORICAL AND GLOBAL MOVEMENTS

- 1. Learning from Past and Global Movements:** The anti-apartheid struggle shows how community-based action and cross-class solidarity drive systemic change.
- 2. Focusing on Basic Needs and Hunger:** Addressing food security and resource access strengthens community resilience and reduces vulnerability to political manipulation.

## ■ THE NEED TO ADDRESS ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

- 1. Shared Power in Democracy:** Civil society and movements must democratize power internally to ensure accountability at every level.
- 2. Division Between Haves and Have-Nots:** Bridging this gap is crucial. Effective organising must connect civic movements with communities to spark widespread action.
- 3. Unemployment and Economic Displacement:** Rising unemployment and technological displacement deepen social exclusion. These challenges demand direct attention to strengthen organising efforts.
- 4. Worker and Community Integration:** Labour and community issues are intertwined. Labour organisations must engage with workers' broader community identities to build unified advocacy.
- 5. Rebuilding Solidarity Across Class:** Class divides must be bridged—those making decisions about hunger often lack first-hand experience of the issue.

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## ■ WHAT WOULD BE REQUIRED FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENTS TO RECLAIM DEMOCRACY FROM BELOW?

- 1. Local Action and Social Movement Alignment:** Put grassroots concerns before donor agendas. Civil society and NGOs should support frontline community movements, building solidarity across a broad base rather than working in isolation. Let local needs guide broader strategies.
- 2. Defining and Unifying the Movement:** Create a shared vision of “social movements” to prevent misalignment. Use common causes like food security to unite efforts. Replace internal competition with mutual support to build a broad democratic movement.
- 3. Supporting Organisers and Smaller Movements:** Create spaces for community self-organisation through projects like community farms, clinics, and LGBTQI initiatives. Build lasting support systems that welcome smaller movements and foster solidarity.
- 4. Intentional Organising Across Regions:** Develop strategic organising across regions, recognizing shared challenges despite local differences. Build regional structures that strengthen movement resilience.
- 5. Need for Greater Coordination Among Unions and Movements:** Revive coordination among labour federations—similar to the United Democratic Front (UDF)—to prevent fragmentation and enable unified action.

## ■ STRATEGIES FOR LONG-TERM CHANGE

- 1. Building Sustainable Movements and Leadership Development:** Use political education to empower democratic engagement. Invest in youth leadership and trust-building through door-to-door outreach and community integration.
- 2. Developing Diverse, Inclusive Tactics:** Embrace creative protest methods, learning from global examples of sit-ins and other tactics. Create reflection spaces to refine strategies through diverse input.
- 3. Action-Oriented Approach:** Start with action; shared values will emerge through practical collaboration.
- 4. Community-Based Political Education:** Bring political education into everyday community spaces beyond formal workshops.
- 5. Collaboration Across Struggles:** Connect different causes—from climate justice to violence prevention—to share strategies and strengthen each movement.

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## CONCLUSION: STRENGTHENING MOVEMENTS FOR PEOPLE'S POWER

The **Thirty Years of Democracy Gathering** and the **Movement Caucus for Democracy** underscored a critical truth: the power of democracy lies not in institutions alone but in the collective strength of people working together to shape their own futures. These events highlighted the pressing need to reclaim democracy from below, root it in the lived realities of communities, and empower those most excluded from its promises.

This discussion document plays a vital role in that effort. It is not merely a reflection on past dialogues, but a tool designed to strengthen social movements and foster people's power. By distilling the insights and strategies from the gatherings, it provides a roadmap for activists, civil society leaders, and grassroots organisations to deepen their engagement, build solidarity, and drive systemic change. It serves as a resource for organising, a framework for action, and an inspiration to reimagine democracy as a participatory and inclusive project.

As movements confront systemic challenges—entrenched inequalities, political demobilization, and growing disillusionment—this document reminds us of the power of unity and shared purpose. It emphasizes that, while contexts may differ, building a collective understanding of our shared political terrain is essential for developing cohesive strategies that can effectively challenge oppression and exclusion.

The path to reclaiming democracy will require courage, persistence, and a commitment to amplifying the voices of the marginalized. By using the ideas and strategies in this document, movements can strengthen their capacity to hold power accountable, foster solidarity across divides, and build a democracy rooted in justice and dignity for all.

# PROGRAMME

Time	Main theme	Sub themes	Facilitator	Speakers
<b>DAY 1: 30 YEARS OF DEMOCRACY</b>				
<b>13:00-13:30</b>	Opening			
<b>13:30-14:30</b>	Reflecting on 30 years of democracy	Perspectives from people's movements	Hameda Deedat	Princess Majola Ruth Ntlokotse Thapelo Mohapi
<b>14:30-16:30</b>	Defining the political crisis: How did we get here?	1994 and the rise of a neoliberal hegemony	Noncedo Madubedube	Dr Niall Reddy
		Contradictions in the alliance	Ferron Pedro	Gunnnett Kaaf
		The demobilisation of South African society	Suraya Jaawoodien	William Shoki
<b>16:30-17:00</b>	Plenary Discussion			
<b>DAY 2: REIMAGINING DEMOCRACY</b>				
<b>9:00-11:30</b>	Democracy and people's power	The 2024 political moment: what does it mean for Social Movements	Koketso Moeti	Dr Sithembile Mbete Mazibuko Jara
<b>11:30-13:00</b>	Democracy from below: A global perspective	Lessons from Brazil, India, and Mexico	William Shoki	Gabriel Tupinambá (Brazil) Sushovan Dhar (India) Geo Mahar (Mexico)
<b>14:00-15:30</b>	Democracy from below	Carving the tools to deepen democracy	Phindile Kunene	Prof Steven Friedman Fatima Hassan Dr Trevor Ngwane
<b>15:30-17:00</b>	Discussion groups: Reimagining a democracy from below			
<b>DAY 3: RECLAIMING A DEMOCRACY FROM BELOW</b>				
<b>9:00-11:00</b>	Strategies to reclaim a democracy from below	Building strong social movements and worker solidarity	Noncedo Madubedube	Nonhle Mbuthuma, Suraya Jawoodien Siya Mama
		Taking the banner of democracy to people		
<b>11:00-12:00</b>	Discussion groups: Strategies to reclaim a democracy from below			



MY VOTE  
COUNTS

