

Active citizenship and its role in changing the South African brand reality

 By [Miller Matola](#)

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We often hear the term 'active citizenship' and see it used in relation to our contribution to the growth and development of South Africa. But do we fully understand what this term means?

I am of the view that if we do not fully understand what things mean, or if we cannot internalise words so that they mean something to us, they will always remain words without any impact and therefore without the required behavioural change.

So what does active citizenship mean? Mirjam van Donk of the Good Governance Learning Network (GGLN) sees "active citizenship as a multi-dimensional image that includes vertical relationships (citizens engaging with the state) and horizontal relationships (citizens engaging with and among themselves)." She equally concedes that "active citizenship is a contested notion, imbued with different meanings and connotations." This is not unique and can be said of many concepts in today's lexicon.

Two way process

The National Development Plan which has recently popularised the concept of active citizenship gives us some idea of what active citizenship refers to. The NDP describes active citizenship as relating to rights, equalising opportunities and enhancing human capabilities. It also finds a strong correlation between active citizenship, government accountability and responsiveness. This is a two way process and holding government to account is viewed as a civic duty. This is extended to citizen participation in shaping policies and their implementation at a national and local level.

In this two way process of shaping South Africa's policy and governance landscape, is also the responsibility - and opportunity - for South Africans to engage with and among themselves. This is the horizontal aspect of active citizenship. This also drives nation building and cohesion in a way that redefines the South African identity. We cannot, even 20 years after attaining democracy, ignore the effect of our history on how we see each other as citizens of a common land, bound by a common flag and anthem, with various starting points but with a common destiny. It is time that we, as South Africans, engage actively in shaping the country we would like to live in, the country we would like our children to inherit.

Essence of active citizenship

In writing this and reflecting upon active citizenship, I was inspired by the words of the South American poet Pablo Neruda who wrote: "... to feel affection that comes from those whom we do not know, from those unknown to us, who are watching over our sleep and solitude, over our dangers and our weaknesses - that is something still greater and more beautiful because it widens out the boundaries of our being and unites all living things." I believe that herein lies the essence of active citizenship and herein lies our answer as to why it matters.

When we feel this common sense of destiny, we begin to take ownership of the present. So while we need to hold public representatives to account, we also need to take active control of building a country that can nurture the needs, dreams and aspirations of each citizen of this country. It can begin with the people with whom we interact most often and it will inevitably grow into a nationwide movement if we each play our part in building our country - for the better and for the future. By playing our part as active citizens, we can each grow South Africa into a competitive nation whose growth and development is sustainable and enduring.

ABOUT MILLER MATOLA

CEO at Brand South Africa

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