



South Africa and Sweden:

A Story of Solidarity, Trust, and Shared Common Values

By Håkan Juholt, Ambassador of Sweden to South Africa

Background

I have a beautiful painting of Oliver Tambo and Olof Palme in my office. Every day, I look into the eyes of these humanitarian role models. I see a pair of committed leaders sharing hopes, commitments, and respect for one another and other human beings. I see their eyes telling me the story of a unique relationship between South Africa and Sweden, one of trust and shared common values. How did two nations, separated by more than just geography, build such a strong bond in the beginning of the 1960s? Sweden was at that stage

an industrialised, prosperous, and stable country with many years of economic growth and progress, while South Africa was a repressive apartheid state where the people suffered. A unique aspect of the relationship was that it was driven by the unique people of each of these nations, with a realisation that their common goals could not be reached in isolation but through an interconnectedness that moved mountains and split oceans apart, joining our two nations for endless opportunities, for years to come.

Up to the 1950s: Flourishing Positive Relations

Contact and relations between South Africa and Sweden date far back. For centuries, South Africa was considered one of the major emigration destinations for many Swedes. Since the mid-17th century, various Swedes have emigrated to South Africa, with a majority opting to settle in the Cape area. They were later followed by others, including sailors, explorers and, from the late 19th century, mainly gold and diamond miners.

Many immigrants came with considerable industrial and entrepreneurial skills and experience, which led to the inception of new commercial enterprises and flourishing trade activities. In 1948, Swedish export to South Africa amounted to 2,3% of total exports, the third highest outside of Europe. South Africa's export to Sweden was also considerable, mainly regarding agricultural produce.

The exchange between the two countries was substantial and differed in outcome. The fact that the majority of South Africans were living under severe impoverished conditions, and that from 1948 onwards they were living under an apartheid regime, was seldom raised. Diplomatic relations continued to flourish, and the major interests were geared towards promoting further links, not least when it came to commerce and culture.

Increased Awareness and Solidarity

With more frequent contact and exposure, the knowledge about the situation for the majority of the people in South Africa grew. The concerning situation became even more obvious after the introduction of apartheid rules.

A number of individuals and an increasing number of communities within the Swedish public reacted. By the end of the 1950s, the image of South Africa had changed dramatically. The growing interest about developments in South Africa put pressure on the leaders in the rest of the world, including Sweden, to react. Organisations and individuals wanted to contribute and presented ideas on how Sweden and Swedes could support change for the people of South Africa. The Swedish Trade Union raised the issue of a consumer boycott. This was, together with consumer

organisations, implemented in early 1960. In 1987, as a young man in my hometown, Oskarshamn, a municipal council debate about the trade embargoes against South Africa ensued. Where many argued that this should be dealt with in the government level, I was one of those who pushed for local municipalities and civilians to take part in the boycotts. Most significantly, we were successful in the boycott of wine and fruit imports with notable impact. Later I was informed that it was Cyril Ramaphosa, today the President of South Africa, who had asked the world to take these measures. In my hometown, I recall that we were most successful in the boycotting of Shell gas and oil consumption where we picketed at all the stations and convinced customers to choose alternative fuel suppliers. I'm still convinced that moral responsibility cannot be handed over to someone else, it must be carried with each one of us at every moment.

The first financial contribution from Sweden towards the fight against apartheid was made in 1959 by the Trade Unions and consumer organisations, with support from leading liberals and social democrats forming The Fund for the Victims of Racial Oppression. Shortly thereafter, another body was formed which became, in my view, the most important group for increased support to the anti-apartheid movement: The Sweden South Africa Committee' (SSAK, later the Isolate South Africa Committee). Under this umbrella, hundreds of organisations from different sectors of the Swedish society became involved, all with the desire to support the elimination of apartheid. The movement was registered and active in 178 different locations in Sweden, a dispersion that few, if any, organisations have since achieved.

Visits to Sweden by leading anti-apartheid activists became more and more frequent. The ANC leader Oliver Tambo was a frequent guest and participated in various demonstrations. He became politically and personally close to Olof Palme, who later became Sweden's prime minister. This special friendship reinforced the long-standing relationship that the two countries share today. Late South African Ambassadors Billy Modise and Lindiwe Mabuza were both posted in Sweden during parts of their leadership tenures within the ANC and remained friends of Sweden. They are reminders of the special relationship between our very distant countries, and they were both decorated with the Royal Order of the

Polar Star for their services to Sweden and for raising awareness among Swedes about the injustices of the apartheid regime ravaging their country.

Direct Humanitarian Support to the Struggle Against Apartheid

In the early 1960s, South Africa was a priority for many Swedes. Swedish foreign policy was geared towards the condemnation of apartheid and support for the liberation struggle. Many Swedes at this time knew more about South Africa than about their neighbouring countries. At the UN, the Swedish Government was at the forefront of initiating and supporting resolutions condemning the apartheid system. The foreign policy stand was to support the liberation movement (the ANC) and activities with the aim of dismantling the apartheid system, isolating, and placing sanctions on the regime, as well as providing support for the frontline states surrounding the country. A fundamental and 'sacred' criterion was that the Swedish support had to be humanitarian. Swedish funds were not to be used for military purposes.

The first direct contribution to liberation movements in Southern Africa began in 1969. A Consultative Committee on Humanitarian Affairs (CCHA) was created as a forum to discuss and decide upon Swedish support to Southern Africa. In the years to come, it became the most important organisation for decision making regarding assistance. It was

composed of high-level representatives from Sida, the Foreign Ministry, political parties, civil society organisations and a few engaged individuals. Its meetings were strictly confidential. During its years, CCHA took decisions amounting to 4 billion Swedish Kronor (today almost 400 million USD) out of which 2,5 billion was channelled to South Africa and 900 million directly to the ANC.

Massive Humanitarian Support Based on Trust.

The historic decision to commence with support for the liberation movement in sovereign states was possible only because it was strongly supported by almost all sectors of Swedish society. Everyone, from political leaders to the public, engaged in a multitude of organisations that shared the wish to contribute to liberating South Africa.

The first direct contribution to the ANC came in 1972/73 and consisted of 35 000 Swedish Kronor (SEK). The contributions increased substantially and reached 135 million SEK in 1993/94. What must be emphasised is that the strong support was based upon the warm friendship between the then-Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme and the then-ANC president Oliver Tambo, which developed during this time.

So how were the funds used? Initially, the allocation was made to cater for what was called 'daily necessities' for ANC refugees in neighbouring countries. After the Soweto uprising in 1976, the number of political refugees surged. I have heard recollections of diplomats serving in the Swedish Embassy in Lusaka from 1987–91 talking about the legendary Treasurer General of the ANC, Thomas Nkobi, arriving at the Embassy every quarter with plastic bags full of receipts of expenditures showing how the Swedish funds had been used.

The scope of the cooperation increased and was used for ANC office expenses, information campaigns including supporting Radio Freedom, agricultural projects, and schools (Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College in Morogoro, Tanzania). What was most confidential and not revealed until after the apartheid system was abolished was that roughly 30% of the allocation was set aside for the budget item 'the Homefront activities', which were the ANC's humanitarian activities within South Africa.

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Every year, formal consultations between Sweden and the ANC took place: with Thomas Nkobi often leading the ANC, and a high-ranking official from either Sida or the Foreign Ministry representing Sweden. The situation inside South Africa, as well as the ANC's and Sweden's activities with relevance to the struggle for the removal of apartheid, were discussed. The use of the allocations was presented in written form (except for the 'Homefront', which was only orally disclosed). Sweden's financial support of the ANC ended in 1993, when the ANC, in line with the Swedish definition, became a political party (and hence no longer a liberation movement).

More Clandestine Support

The direct support to the ANC's civil activities was a small part of the Swedish support under the heading 'Humanitarian assistance to victims of and opponents to the apartheid regime.' Part of the funds were also distributed to international organisations, such as IDAF and different UN agencies.

A large part of the assistance was channelled through a complicated and creative scheme based on trust, devotion, and a touch of diplomatic and legal shrewdness. A great number of Swedish organisations were involved, and an even greater number of South Africans received the contributions. Tor Sellström – diplomat, researcher, and esteemed author of publications including *Sweden and National Liberation in Southern Africa* – estimated that more than 180 South African organisations received Swedish aid from the late 1960s to 1993/1994. When the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed in 1983, a considerable part of the increased support was channelled to and through UDF. A system so strongly relying on trust was at risk of misuse. The charismatic leader, UDF-founder and clergyman Allan Boesak, was accused of intercepting Scandinavian funds meant for the poor and sentenced to prison, but subsequently received a presidential pardon a year later.

Political, Trade, and Cultural Anti-Apartheid Activities

With the historical united support involving a large part of the extensive Swedish civil society, other forms of support were initiated as well. Under Olof Palme's leadership, Sweden was a clear voice, not seldom

condemning all forms of oppression. At the UN scene, Sweden was very active in presenting different forms of actions, not least UN-resolutions. In our diplomatic work, the issue of apartheid was high on the agenda in our deliberations with other countries.

The broad anti-apartheid movement increased their plea for isolation in the late 1970s and demands were high to impose sanctions. A first act of Swedish legislation regulating trade with South Africa was introduced in 1979. Later, after severe pressure from the Swedish public, the umbrella organisation Isolate South Africa Committee (ISAK) demanded tighter legislation. A total embargo on trade with South Africa (and Namibia) was passed by the Swedish Parliament in 1987. The trade between the two countries plummeted from 1,5 billion SEK in 1984 to 41 million SEK in 1988.

A good example of the Swedish solidarity with and backing of the anti-apartheid movement was 'the Gala for the ANC', in which twenty of the Swedish leading popular musicians of the time came together in November 1985 in a major exhibition for the ANC in Sweden. Later, in 1987, most of them joined together once again and performed in Zambia and Zimbabwe in what was called the 'Frontline Rock Tour'.

In February 1986, the 'People's Parliament against Apartheid' was organised in Stockholm, with important international attendance. One week later, Palme was assassinated. When his friend Oliver Tambo in 1989 suffered from 'cerebral haemorrhage', Sweden organised for him to be treated in Sweden. After his release from prison, Nelson Mandela made his first trip outside of Africa to Sweden to visit his old friend Tambo at the hospital in Sweden, while also showing his gratitude to Sweden's support and contribution to the struggle.

Post-1994: New Challenges, Supporting One Another to Build a Better Tomorrow

It was obvious that the relation and cooperation between the two nations had to be transformed due to the fundamental changes brought by South Africa's first democratic elections. The unique financial support for the anti-apartheid movement was transformed into a more traditional kind of development assistance. The aim was to contribute

to improving economic conditions for the poor, especially due to the structural disadvantages established during apartheid, to develop the young democracy, and to assist in state building. The assistance was from the outset designed to be finite and the official development cooperation with South Africa ceased in 2013. Sweden has, however, recently relocated a team managing the regional sexual and reproductive health and rights strategy (SRHR) as well as a hub working on democracy and human rights in the region. A new government strategy for support to SRHR in the region was decided last year, covering the period 2022–2026, and amounting to about 3.5 billion SEK, equivalent to 314m USD. Through Sida, and the 57 MSUD regional Eastern and Southern Africa 2gether4SRHR joint UN Programme partnership, a total investment of about 871 264 USD has been made in South Africa. Priorities have included strengthening the integration of HIV, SRHR, and GBV services in recent years. Through the programme, Sweden also contributed 440 000 ZAR towards the budget for the Presidential Gender Based Violence and Femicide Summit in 2022. The total support from Sida which has flowed directly to South Africa through a variety of partnerships and programs amounted to over 20m USD in 2020.

The sanctions were removed in 1993 and the trade started to increase. In 2021, trade between our two countries amounted to over 900m USD. The political contacts were maintained, and mutual state visits took place. However, the intensity diminished during President Zuma's time in power. A political vehicle aimed at deepening and expanding the links between our two countries was introduced by President Mbeki and Prime Minister Persson in 1999, constituting of a Bilateral Commission (BNC) at the Vice-Presidential level. The BNC is intended to meet every second year. Lately, however, the frequency of these meetings has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

This has not stopped our countries from working to support one another and collaborate on several other levels. South Africa, as a unique and attractive country, has continued to attract around 100 Swedish commercial ventures, including but most certainly not limited to Scania, SAAB, H&M, Polarium, and – recently inaugurated by President Ramaphosa – Sandvik. We have a trade commission, Business Sweden, stationed in the country to facilitate trade and investment

between the two countries and the region, with many exciting collaborations and possibilities envisioned in the sectors of innovation and technology, city twinning, climate and environment, manufacturing, and more.

Education can never be taken from an individual once they have received it. This is a shared sentiment between Sweden and President Nelson Mandela. We recently, together with nine other Embassies across Africa, and the Liliesleaf Foundation, again with the support from the Swedish Institute, launched a project on Sweden's links to various liberation struggles across Africa, highlighting the value of international solidarity and activism in the fight for freedom. This was launched in the form of an interactive website, aimed at inspiring young people to learn about the challenges of the past as a context for addressing their current challenges as the leaders of tomorrow.

We also have the greatest collaboration between our two countries recently renewed in the form of the South Africa Sweden University Forum. SASUF is a transformative project uniting 40 universities from across Sweden and South Africa, bringing together leading researchers, teachers, students, university leaders, and other stakeholders to develop joint solutions to the challenges posed by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030.

Our shared common values can be seen in the years of policy promotion activities and values-based promotion. The ongoing work toward a gender equal society has encouraged us to run campaigns together with local partners in events and discussions like 'Swedish South African Dads', an exhibition inspired by the value that fathers have found in taking extended parental leave (480 days for both parents) available to them in Sweden, to care for their children and take a more active role in unpaid care work. During this period, South Africa also passed the legislation to increase paternity leave from 3 days to 10 days, marking a significant milestone.

Culturally, Sweden has continued to honour the legacy of the Freedom Fighters of the previous generation, while also providing platforms to engage with the leaders and influencers of the future. Among several cultural exchanges and grants for young practitioners, including the NGO Hear My Voice, South

Africa was also recently welcomed as the guest of honour to Scandinavia's largest cultural gathering: the Gothenburg Book Fair, also honouring Ambassador Lindiwe Mabuza and Tor Sellström.

We have so much in common and we need to all have the mutual interest to protect and develop our shared values. Most importantly, we cannot work in silos. We need to meet, share experiences, knowledge, challenges and continue to show one another mutual respect to continue to achieve the goals we are working towards on so many levels. So, what are our shared common values which need to be strengthened 35 years after the untimely death of Olof Palme? Some significant priorities I have identified include: the need for social dialogue in the workplace for the just transition agenda, women, peace and security, sexual and reproductive health and rights,

and a multilevel focus on the effects of climate change on our environment. How do we achieve these and other important priorities? We must focus on inclusion and the building of good relationships between civil society, trade unions, private sector, sport, culture, academia and government through continuous dialogue and bond-building. Because, I still see it every day in the eyes of those two heroes on my wall: our unique resource, where their dreams truly can be our reality, are the relations between the people of our nations built on a foundation, long ago, of solidarity, trust, and common values.

Many of the facts in this article are based upon the two volumes by Tor Sellström, Sweden and National Liberation of Southern Africa. Tor, regrettably, passed away in August 2022. RIP.