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## **How Hope Defi(n)es South Africa: Reimagining Hope in Johannesburg's Slovo Park Beyond State Failures**

Eileen Jahn

Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies, Bayreuth,  
Germany

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## How Hope Defi(n)es South Africa: Reimagining Hope in Johannesburg's Slovo Park Beyond State Failures

Eileen Jahn

This article examines the dual role of hope in South Africa, highlighting its power as both a transformative force and a constraining burden amid systemic state failures and persistent socio-economic inequalities. Drawing on President Cyril Ramaphosa's rhetoric of hope as a cornerstone of national identity and resilience, it explores how hope operates politically and affectively in a society shaped by historical adversity, political disillusionment, and ongoing infrastructural crises. Focusing ethnographically on the Slovo Park informal settlement in Johannesburg, the article reveals how residents navigate government rhetoric, exposing hope's paradoxical role—offering resilience while also fueling frustration. While state-sponsored hope has served as a tool of governance and social cohesion, its failure to deliver tangible change has led marginalized communities to redefine hope on their own terms. Engaging with literature on hope as both an aspirational force and a mechanism of control, this article argues that hope sustains belief in progress but also constrains agency when institutional failures persist. Shifting focus from state rhetoric, it highlights how marginalized communities reconstruct hope as a grassroots tool for change—transforming it into a source of agency, resilience, and self-determined action, and reclaiming its potential to drive meaningful change. This analysis contributes to broader debates on hope's role in perpetuating systemic inequalities while also offering a means for reclaiming its power to drive meaningful change in post-apartheid South Africa.

**Keywords:** grassroots agency, hope, infrastructure, political affect, South Africa, state failure

In his 2019 State of the Nation Address (SoNA), just a year before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa introduced a key theme that would reappear prominently in political discourse and his subsequent speeches: hope.

"We are a people of resilience, of determination and of optimism. Despite the worst excesses of apartheid, we did not descend into vengeance when our freedom was won. [...] At times it has seemed that the milk of human kindness that allowed us to reconcile in 1994 had gone sour. But we will not surrender to the forces of pessimism and defeatism. [...] They told us building a non-racial South Africa was impossible, and that we would never be able to truly heal from our bitter past. Yet we weathered the storm, and we are prevailing. It was the eternal optimism of the human spirit that kept hopes alive

during our darkest time. It is this optimism that will carry us forward as we face a brave new future.’  
(Ramaphosa 2019: 26f)

After centuries of colonial oppression, after apartheid, and over 30 years since the first democratic elections in 1994, President Ramaphosa’s statement sought to reaffirm the resilience, determination, and optimism of the South African people in the face of historical adversity. He acknowledges reconciliation challenges and celebrates progress in overcoming past divisions. The President credits the nation’s progress to ‘the eternal optimism of the human spirit,’ suggesting hope as a driving force. His statement crafts a narrative of perseverance and hope amidst persistent post-apartheid challenges. But how does this rhetoric of hope resonate with marginalised communities? And what happens when hope, as a political and social force, is at the heart of a nation-state project while at the same time, it is becoming entangled with disillusionment and unfulfilled promises?

Situated on Johannesburg’s infrastructural, urban, and socio-economic margins, the (Joe) Slovo Park<sup>1</sup> informal settlement offers a microcosm of these tensions. Long a battleground for development and access to essential services, Slovo Park reflects the stark disparities between political promises and tangible change. Drawing on 12 months of ethnographic research on residents’ fraught experiences with electricity—or its persistent absence—between 2022 and 2025, this predominantly ethnographic article examines how hope, as a political affect, is shaped, sustained, and contested in the face of infrastructural failures and unmet state promises. It explores how residents navigate state-sponsored hope and their realities, revealing hope as both a marker of resilience and a burden while cultivating their alternatives. Decades of unmet promises have left residents disillusioned. In this community, where hopes for a post-apartheid utopia once loomed large, the phrase ‘being tired of hope’ captures the frustration of a perpetual cycle of anticipation and letdown. Yet, hope endures, serving at once as a heavy burden and a force that inspires resilience and the potential for change.

The broader national context of South Africa’s ongoing power crisis, within which these localized struggles unfold, further complicates life in Slovo Park. In late 2022 and early 2023, ‘load shedding’—scheduled power outages intended to balance supply and demand—escalated dramatically. For many, including Slovo Park residents, this meant up to 10 hours without power daily, disrupting every aspect of everyday life. Blackouts often lasted even longer in rural and marginalized urban areas, further exposing the inequalities that persist in service delivery. The crisis underscored South Africa’s precarious energy situation, with international companies, the South African Reserve Bank, and media outlets (see Daily Investor 2023, SABC News 2023) debating worst-case scenarios, including a complete grid collapse. Though deemed unlikely, the possibility of a national blackout sparked security briefings and discussions about backup solutions (Allan 2023, Vermeulen 2023).

Throughout this energy crisis, economic struggles, and political tensions, hope remained central to political discourse as South Africa

approached the 2024 general elections. In this uncertainty, President Ramaphosa and other African National Congress (ANC) leaders sought to rally support by framing hope as both a necessity and a political commitment. At the ANC manifesto launch in February 2024, South Africa's Deputy President, Paul Mashatile, expressed anticipation for the President to instill hope in the people. Ramaphosa, in turn, echoed this sentiment, pledging that ANC supporters in the May 2024 elections could expect a government dedicated to restoring hope in areas tarnished by corruption, inefficiency, and lack of service delivery. Their remarks, while acknowledging a partial loss of hope, imply that the state's primary duty is to uphold hope, suggesting the ANC's dominance, rooted in its historical role as the leading party in the anti-apartheid struggle and the 1994 democratic transition, hinges on its ability to sustain hope among the populace. Ramaphosa echoed this sentiment, pledging that an ANC-led government would restore trust and progress in areas long neglected. Yet these declarations rang hollow for many. Critics argue the party had lost its moral compass, prioritizing political patronage and self-enrichment over addressing systemic issues. Scandals involving senior officials and unmet promises have eroded public trust and spurred calls for accountability and a change in political leadership. In Slovo Park, such critiques resonate deeply. Residents like Phelelani, a community leader who has lived in the settlement with her family for over two decades, articulate weariness from unmet expectations. 'They [politicians] are promising lies for the people just to continue on hope,' she told me during one of our conversations. Her words echo broader frustrations across South Africa where persistent challenges have deepened the disillusionment in once ANC-loyal communities.

The idea of hope itself has become a contested terrain. Political commentator Onkgopotse JJ Tabane captured this tension in the lead-up to the 2023 SoNA, remarking: 'We are prisoners of hope in South Africa' (Eyewitness News 2023, 4:00–4:03). His observation reflects hope's dual character, serving as a double-edged sword: inspiring optimism or trapping individuals, communities, and even states in their quest for change or progress, and cultivate a sense of dependency. Within Joe Slovo Park, this duality is palpable. Hope persists as a driving force, but its weight is undeniable, shaping the rhythms of daily life as residents grapple with both immediate challenges, such as accessing electricity and securing funds for infrastructural development, and the broader struggle for systemic change.

### **Hope in Crisis: Force of Change and Constraint**

Hope has gained significance as a political symbol and a subject of extensive scholarly examination with a long philosophical tradition. A surge in literature on hope began around the turn of the millennium, with anthropological focus emerging in the nineteen-nineties, particularly in the context of global capitalism and neoliberalism (Kleist and Jansen 2016: 373, Hage 2003). Research in this area ranges from the empirical analysis of hopes (e.g. Miyazaki 2004,

Crapanzano 2003), to how hope changes (e.g. Miyazaki 2006), to studies of its relationship to affects such as waiting (Janeja and Bandak (eds.) 2018), disappointment (Zigon 2018), despair (Harvey 2000), and optimism (Zournazi 2002; Zigon 2009; Liisberg et. al. (eds.) 2015). In South Africa, hope emerges as a dominant and intensely recognized force in public discourse and political rhetoric (see Olivier 2005). This is evident in the context of health crises, such as HIV/AIDS, where hope counterbalances despair, helping individuals navigate the challenges of living with HIV/AIDS (Kylmä et al. 2001, Pegrum 1997). Studies with long-term survivors also emphasize hope's crucial role in coping with HIV/AIDS (Kylmä et al. 2001), while for HIV-positive pregnant women, it empowers them and prevents mother-to-child transmission but also unifies advocacy for treatment access (Nkomo 2015). Beyond health, hope also fosters resilience and social cohesion in national narratives (Olivier 2005).

This article builds on existing scholarship examining uncertainty as a site for constructing and negotiating particular formations of hope (Kleist and Jansen 2016, Cooper and Pratten 2015, Johnson-Hanks 2005). Crises—political, economic, or infrastructural—offer critical moments in which hope is redefined and contested (Kleist and Jansen 2016, Vigh 2008). In South Africa, converging political and electrical crises position hope as an aspirational force, grounded in the country's history and central to the post-apartheid socio-political order. However, state-sponsored hope lacks affective leverage against the lived realities of those on the socio-economic and political margins. In this dynamic, people cultivate their own political hope, rooted in and shaped by their lived experiences and aimed at generating tangible alternatives.

In the section of the article entitled *South Africa's Enduring Spirit of Hope*, I investigate how hope has evolved from apartheid to post-apartheid through political discourse. This builds on the scholarship conceptualizing hope as a governance tool to sustain social order, manage expectations, and reinforce ideology (Hage 2003, Turner 2015). Anti-apartheid and transition narratives frame hope as transformative, especially in crises. Anchored in ideals like the Rainbow Nation, this discourse has significantly influenced public understandings of hope since the nineteen-nineties, depicting it as key to unity and resilience amid ongoing crises. While leaders use hope rhetorically, this article explores its deeper political and affective functions. Given the unfulfilled post-apartheid promises, you might ask: How does hope mediate the relationship between the South African state and its people? How has its political role evolved, and what are its shifting effects?<sup>22</sup> In the section on *The Persistence of Hope under Increasingly Stale Prospects*, I ethnographically situate state-sponsored hope within Slovo Park residents' lived experiences, where hope shifts from inspiration to burden, weighted by unfulfilled promises, cyclical disappointments, and systemic inequalities. How do repeated broken promises affect their relationship with the state? To what extent is hope a mechanism of control, sustaining engagement in a failing system? How do people resist or reframe political hope? By foregrounding these questions, this article contributes to debates on hope both as a force of endurance and as a constraint (Berlant 2011, Zigon 2009). Finally, I summarize

the findings and reflect on hope's ongoing role in shaping politics, public expectations, and everyday struggles in South Africa.

### South Africa's Enduring Spirit of Hope

On February 9th, 2023, the President delivered his 7th SoNA at Cape Town City Hall, which I watched via live stream on my laptop in my studio apartment in Johannesburg. He opened by acknowledging, 'We gather here at a time of crisis,' (Ramaphosa 2023: 3), referring to the electricity crisis. In general, each SoNA allows the President to review past promises, set priorities for the coming year, and articulate a vision for the country. It could even be said that it is essentially a moment when hope is manifested. After formal greetings, directed to everyone, from politicians to the people of South Africa, Ramaphosa reflects on the essence of nationhood and what defines South Africans as a people:

'A moment of the State of the Nation endears us to ask ourselves a number of questions but the one I want to focus on today is, what defines us as a nation? We are not a nation defined by the oceans and the rivers that form the boundaries of our land. We are not defined by the minerals under our earth or the spectacular landscape above it. We are not even defined by the languages and the cultures that we have as a people, by the songs that we sing, or even by the work that we do. We are at our most essential a nation defined by hope and resilience. It was hope that sustained us during the struggle for freedom. And it is hope that swells our sails as we steer our country out of turbulent waters to calmer seas. Even in these trying times, it is hope that should sustain us and fuel our determination to overcome even the greatest of difficulties. And difficulties we have by the ton.' (Ramaphosa on Eyewitness News 2023, 1:22:54—1:24:34)

He strategically reframes the crisis, emphasizing hope and resilience as integral national characteristics rooted in South Africa's history and essential for its future. By drawing on the historical significance of hope in the freedom struggle, he positions it as a collective and historical force guiding the nation through the current crisis. Hope thus becomes not only a shared national attribute but also a symbolic continuation of the country's enduring spirit of struggle and subsequent victory. This rhetorical strategy carried into the 2024 SoNA, where Ramaphosa again invoked historical memory—this time explicitly linking the present to South Africa's democratic transition by citing Nelson Mandela: 'This is the beginning of a new era [...] of hope, reconciliation and nation building' (Mandela in Ramaphosa 2024). By invoking Mandela's words, Ramaphosa reinforced his vision of hope as central to South Africa's progress, not only honoring Mandela's legacy and the ethos of sacrifice but also reaffirming his own commitment to nation-building. Through uniting past struggles with present aspirations, hope becomes the bridge connecting South Africa's past, present, and future, anchoring the nation in a shared vision of resilience, unity, and progress. This narrative of perseverance continues to resonate with the nation's collective memory and its hopes for the future.

Ramaphosa's emphasis on hope as a defining national trait and a force for progress is not merely rhetorical; it draws on a much deeper historical lineage. The idea that hope can sustain a nation through hardship has long been central to South Africa's political imagination, from the anti-apartheid struggle to the dawn of democracy. But what role did hope play during the darkest years of apartheid? How did it sustain resistance movements, and how was it transformed into a political force that helped shape the new South Africa?

From 1948 to 1994, the apartheid system established and enforced a complex array of measures that institutionalized and legalized racial segregation, subordination, and discrimination. These regulations controlled every aspect of life, from where individuals could live, attend school, work, seek medical care, spend their free time, or even form personal relationships. The police, military, bureaucracy, and educational institutions—typical instruments of colonial control—were used to enforce white supremacist rule. Black,<sup>3</sup> Indian, Coloured, and Asian people<sup>4</sup> faced brutality and systemic violence, including physical and psychological abuse, arbitrary arrests, killings, and forced disappearances. They were systematically marginalized, stripped of their political rights, and denied citizenship. This relentless oppression essentially relegated and confined them to the status of 'non-people' (Nyamnjoh 2013: 11).

The anti-apartheid struggle was driven by ideals of justice, equality, human dignity, and peace in a society ruthlessly fractured by racial domination, discrimination, and exploitation. Beyond the framework of 'existence is resistance,'<sup>5</sup> hope was essential in sustaining the anti-apartheid movement. In 1975, Nelson Mandela wrote to Winnie Mandela, 'Difficulties break some men but make others. No axe is sharp enough to cut the soul of a sinner who keeps on trying, one armed with the hope that he will rise even in the end' (Nelson Mandela Foundation n.d.). As an aspirational force—even though it lay in an indefinitely distant and uncertain future—, it allowed people to envision a future free from segregation and oppression, with dignity, and social and economic justice for all.

Apartheid's end sparked a plethora of optimistic expectations in the country and globally for the future of South Africa and, in fact, for humanity. These aspirations were tied to open elections, equality under the law, free political activity, individual rights, human dignity, constitutional government, and more. Rapid and far-reaching political, economic, and social changes followed to actualize the transition. Affirming the universal and accommodating the different, proclaiming civil liberties, democratic rights, and (political) freedom for all as the promise of a new South Africa after the brutal system of white minority rule under apartheid manifested hope as a powerful force. The 1996 Constitution enshrined the vision of a non-racial, non-sexist, and ultimately non-discriminatory democracy, serving as a beacon of hope for generations to come. After 1994, for example, South Africa saw reforms, where civil society gained more influence in policymaking, minimum housing standards were established, and social grants were introduced to

assist the impoverished. Economic policies addressed apartheid's disparities, for instance, through workers' rights, affirmative action and universal health care. Education reforms introduced free basic education for all children and inclusive curricula. Thus, in South Africa, hope has a history of catalyzing significant political change, yielding tangible and far-reaching effects that many scholars fail to address.

In the early 1990s, negotiations and elections paved the way for a democratic future, marking the presumed endpoint of a prolonged struggle against racial oppression, inequality, and bigotry, as well as the dismantling of racially organized political, economic, and social structures (MacDonald 2006). The post-apartheid era was infused with hope, reflecting the nation's aspirations for reconciliation and restorative justice while serving as a cornerstone of the nation-building project. Once an outcast of the international community, South Africa transformed from racially entrenched authoritarian rule into a democracy and a global symbol of democratic hope. As Annalena Baerbock, Germany's Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs, emphasized in June 2023, 'South Africa's path to freedom has been a beacon of hope inspiring men and women around the world' (Vögele 2023; due to a slip of the tongue, she said 'bacon'). Initially, this hope was embodied by figures such as Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Solomon Mahlangu, Albertina Sisulu, Steve Biko, and Rahima Moosa. However, with the transition to democracy, hope expanded beyond individual leaders to encompass the entire nation, which was seen internationally as capable of generating alternative narratives and visions for the future. Ultimately, this shift marked the emergence of a shared, collective hope—one that not only imagined different possibilities for societies and the world but also believed in the ability to realize them.

The success of the anti-apartheid struggle and transition to democracy affirmed the feasibility of long-held aspirations. The nineteen-nineties and the far-reaching constitutional, judicial, administrative, political, social, and economic changes that transformed how South Africans related to hope. Rather than projecting desires and aspirations toward an undefined future point, people began to expect the fulfillment of these hopes in the immediate future of tomorrow. At the same time, the locus for the realization of the hoped-for was essentially pushed into the realm of the state. Far from being a monolith, the state is a dynamic ensemble of practices, communities, processes, and individuals whose interactions and interpretations collectively produce its effects. Consequently, the transition brought sweeping changes and a belief in the state's ability to actualize that change.

Hope has long been central to South Africa's socio-political order, from its role in the anti-apartheid struggle to its use as a tool of governance in the democratic era. While leaders like Mandela and Ramaphosa have framed hope as a unifying and transformative force, its persistence amid unfulfilled promises and systemic inequalities has made it a burden for many. The next section examines how Slovo Park residents experience and challenge this exhaustion of hope.



## **'We're Tired of Hope': The Persistence of Hope under Increasingly Stale Prospects**

Sitting across from Nonhlanhla, a widow in her late 50s who fixes clothes for sparsely paying customers inside her half-brick, half-metal sheet house, I can't quite figure out who is pictured in the blurry color photograph hanging behind her. My gaze doesn't go unnoticed. 'This is my late husband when he was young,' she says from in front of the faded wooden wall unit decorated with a few glasses and faded group and portrait photos. Leaning against an oval wooden table, his suit jacket unbuttoned, her late husband sits on a dark brown leather couch in the photo, in front of a similar wooden display cabinet filled with plates, cups, and bowls. 'And the one sitting next to him is Jacob Zuma,' she adds looking straight at me. Without elaborating on the picture, she jumps back to continue telling me about Slovo Park's history.

'We've been through a lot, hey. And too many leaders have passed on already, without ever seeing change. [...] After the Gauteng Premier back in 1998, [...] promised houses being built in the settlement and that we would not be moved elsewhere, the City assured us in 2001 that the construction of 950 new houses will start in September the same year and that money had been set aside for that. They even put up a big tent from the City right next to where the community hall is now. The same promise about the houses was made again in 2003 by people from the National Department of Housing and the Province, I think the Gauteng Department of Housing and Local Government.'

Nonhlanhla was one of the first people to settle in Slovo, which today is home to an estimated 12,000 to 18,000 formally unemployed or working poor Black (South) Africans, a fraction of whom work in the nearby sweets and general goods factories across the road from the settlement's southern border. It was established in the late 1980s on the remaining portion of Lot 33 of the Olifantsvlei 316-IQ farm, located in southern Johannesburg, near the southern edge of Soweto. For nearly three decades, since 1995, Slovo Park residents and community leaders have actively engaged and collaborated with housing officials at various levels of government to advocate for the development of their settlement. Nonhlanhla continues:

'Just a year later, after nothing had come to life, the Premier and Ralegoma, who was in the Mayoral Committee for Housing back then, put up another tent and told us that by September the houses would start to be built. Just before the elections in 2006, I think it was early December 2005, after they found dolomite here and told us that fewer houses could be built, the Mayor promised to put money towards Slovo Park to build houses. After that, nothing happened. A lot of talking, talking, talking, and in 2007 we were promised again that houses will be built in September but this time around a lot fewer than before. Because of the dolomite. [...] The number of houses got only smaller over the years and plans to relocate more and more of us came up again and again.'

Illustrating not only a pattern of broken promises and unfulfilled commitments made by government officials regarding the construction of houses in Slovo Park, Nonhlanhla's narration also asserts a trajectory of dwindling prospects.

The reference to dolomite as a cause of delay due to its susceptibility to dissolution, which can lead to sinkholes, ground instability, and structural damage in affected areas, underscores the difficulties of construction. Dolomite is essential to the iron and steel industry as a flux to lower the melting point of iron ore, as a source of magnesium to improve the strength and microstructure of steel, as a refractory to withstand high temperatures in blast furnaces and converters, and as a promising material for renewable energy storage solutions (Humphries et al. 2018). In Slovo and similar settlements, 'dolomite' has become synonymous with 'resettlement,' indicating a tendency to displace residents because of this geological problem. However, while dolomite does pose legitimate structural risks, it is increasingly associated with the political intentions of officials to remove residents from certain areas, effectively transforming it into a bureaucratic mechanism to evade commitments to housing development. The settlement's residents increasingly perceive references to dolomite not as neutral scientific assessments but as strategic justifications for displacement, reinforcing their disillusionment with a state that repeatedly fails to deliver material improvements to their lives. In this way, dolomite symbolizes a broader pattern of hope employed by the state—rhetorically promising progress while functionally sustaining marginalization. The mention of a 'lot of talking, talking, talking' emphasizes the perceived lack of concrete action and tangible results, further contributing to the community's growing sense of distrust toward government officials and institutions.

'At some point, I think in late 2008, even a Township plan was submitted to the City but I don't know what came of it. By then, not only the issue of houses was important to us but also service delivery, water, electricity, roads, and sewage. [...] Over the years, we've been speaking to so many government officials and high-level ANC members, but nothing ever changed. Since 2008 we also worked with legal organizations, first with the Legal Resources Centre and then with SERI [Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa], but for many years they also didn't get much out of government and City officials. [...] We even won a court case against the City to finally upgrade Slovo. But as you can see, nothing ever changes. All promises and up to today, all empty promises and empty excuses. The only thing we got in 2018 was electricity from the City. Nobody from the government has delivered on the promises they made.'

Despite repeated promises from politicians and government officials, the Slovo Park community still lacks access to formal services and adequate housing. Politicians and government officials have visited the settlement, engaged with community leaders, and offered assurances of imminent development. Feasibility studies, including geotechnical surveys and socio-economic assessments, have been completed, and layout plans have been devised. Steps have been taken to designate Slovo Park as a Township and to provide funding for proposed development initiatives. This designation process will formalize the settlement as a legally recognized residential area, including land demarcation, secure land tenure, and the permanent provision of basic services such as water, electricity, sanitation, and roads. It also allows for urban planning, infrastructure development, and integration into municipal

governance, improving residents' access to services and legal protection. Legal action was pursued against the City of Johannesburg in 2014, resulting in a favorable ruling for the residents in 2016 (Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa 2020). However, despite these efforts and proactive community advocacy and litigation, tangible progress toward permanent housing, tarred roads, and improved sanitation systems remains elusive.

As I walk around Slovo with Kulani and Itumeleng, I realize that there is no space in the surrounding area to expand the settlement. Kulani and Itumeleng are both part of the local ANC Youth League chapter, active leaders in the Slovo Park Community Youth Forum and have lived in the settlement all their lives. Slovo Park is located adjacent to an industrial area in Nancefield, positioned between Eldorado Park and the securely fenced-in area of bonded houses known as Bushkoppies. It is bordered on the west by the nearby floodplains of the Klipspruit River. On the way to Phelelani's house, we wind through narrow lanes beneath tall steel overland transmission towers, three layers of high-voltage power lines stacked on top of each other, transecting the settlement from north to south. As I stop at Phelelani's fence, ready to join inside for a quick refreshment, I am struck by the overhead cables towering over us, cutting streaks through the clear blue sky and casting thin gray shadows on the red soil. 'Before you come in, wash these for me,' Phelelani says, directing her request at me and handing me five plastic cups. Accompanied by Itumeleng, I walk out, over to the standpipe at the top of the street to rinse the cups. 'Did you hear about the guy who died trying to connect his cable to the big one up there?' she asks, throwing her head back to look at the spot. Trying not to imagine the incident, I shake my head: 'No.'

As we squeeze between the fence and the door of Phelelani's house, I am enveloped by warmth and a sudden thirst. Itumeleng and I join the others seated on the low couch and black plastic chairs. When I ask Phelelani if we can continue our conversation from the other day about the situation in Slovo Park, she starts right away: 'It was a struggle I tell you, we come far as people. But here we are, we won the court case and they said they were going to electrify this place, which they did, and they said they were going to build RDPs<sup>6</sup>, but they haven't done that,' she exhales. 'And now, we are in the middle of load shedding, now we don't even know when is it going to end.' In 2018, the City of Johannesburg installed electricity distribution lines, individual poles, and a meter in the main household of each plot in Slovo, however, only temporarily, pending upgrading to a full Township. 'You see, these political parties, they are campaigning, saying different things [...]. They are promising lies for the people just to continue on hope. [...] ANC playing with people's lives, how many years they have promised us houses and resettlement,' Phelelani continues, pointing up, 'away from under these cables. Nothing, we are still waiting. They [the politicians] never honour their promises, they only try to give us hope that maybe someday they will come and fix this problem,' she added, her voice slowly rising. 'My uncle Mdala has been waiting for his RDP since the nineties,' Kulani adds as everyone else slowly nods their heads, 'but a few years back, he decided to start building his own brick house right here in Slovo.'

Phelelani's account of broken assurances reflects a cycle of hope, disappointment, and frustration experienced by the Slovo Park community in response to promises of development and improvement made by government officials, and illustrates a complex relationship between promises and hope within the community. Repeated failures to deliver on commitments have created a deep skepticism and distrust of political promises, with Phelelani bluntly accusing politicians of offering false hope and 'promising lies' to further their agendas. A promise can inspire hope by signalling a commitment to a better future, while hope can reinforce the promise by sustaining belief in the fulfillment of that commitment, even in the face of setbacks or challenges. While promises initially inspire hope for positive change and improved livelihoods, the continual failure to deliver on those promises erodes that hope over time. Each unfulfilled promise serves as a blow to the community's aspirations, reinforcing a cycle of disappointment. Promises made by authorities and politicians are often used as political tools to manipulate and appease the community, rather than as genuine commitments to address their needs, which over time exposes the failure of hope mobilized by the state as a political narrative and emphasizes its waning leverage without meaningful material changes. Ultimately, hope and promises have become synonymous with deception and manipulation for Slovo residents. The manipulation of hope by government officials through empty promises to postpone material change to an unknown point in the future, to hold out, perpetuates a cycle of dependency and disappointed expectations, leaving community members feeling abandoned and marginalized.

While the March 2016 court order established resettlement as a last resort for the number of people the land can accommodate, part of the phased plan was to relocate the metal sheet houses under and directly adjacent to the electricity transmission towers that cut through the settlement, either within the Slovo Park area at a safe distance from the towers or to another parcel of public land. 'Eish, Eileena. I tell you, we're tired, just tired. No politician looks out for the communities [...]. We waited for RDPs, even today, we are still waiting,' Phelelani shakes her head gently and looks straight at me.

'People were told just to make sure that they do not even build houses because they [the government] are going to build houses for them. And then when those things do not happen, what do you expect? Me, I can't build a house under these power lines. But even if I lived somewhere else in Slovo, I wouldn't.'

She takes another sip of water before concluding, 'We're just tired of hope.' An unnerving silence falls over the room, broken only by the occasional clicking of tongues to indicate annoyance or disappointment, as we empty our cups.

Despite winning a court case, securing a firm court order, and receiving repeated promises of general improvements and development, overall change has yet to materialize. Phelelani's words underscore a deep disillusionment and frustration that stems from unfulfilled promises by political parties, particularly the ANC, regarding housing and relocation

from dangerous areas near transmission towers. Her criticism extends to the tendency of politicians to make empty promises during election campaigns, which she has personally experienced. Phelelani's tone reflects resignation and weariness, expressing skepticism about meaningful change and a longing for tangible solutions over the continued delay and empty rhetoric. The phrase 'playing with people's lives' underscores a deep-seated distrust of political motives. This narrative reflects a pervasive sense of disillusionment with the cycle of promises and dashed hopes, and highlights issues of governance, accountability, and representation that shape South Africa's political landscape amid a broader global disillusionment with democratic systems.

In Phelelani's account and Mdala's example of whether or not to build a brick house in Slovo Park, everyday life with hope bereft of material changes, however stale it may feel, unfolds differently: For Phelelani, building in Slovo is not an option, perhaps because she is holding on to the possibility that the state will step in and build it for her but potentially also because she doesn't have any extra money to spare and wouldn't be considered a plot owner in the case of upgrade, which meant she would have to relocate away from Slovo Park anyway. Mdala, on the other hand, chooses to build his own brick house to make a difference for himself and his family rather than wait endlessly for the government to assist. The relationship to and manifestation in the present, and the activating effects of hope echo Sara Ahmed's words: 'The moment of hope is when the "not yet" impresses upon us in the present, such that we must act, politically, to make it our future.' (2014: 184). If hope is indeed present-oriented, then it compels, in this case, Mdala, to act in the present rather than waiting for a future that always remains ahead of us. In other words, the presence of hope demands proactive engagement with the current circumstances to shape and realize the envisioned future. As people relinquish their hopes in the state to actualize significant changes to their lives, individuals begin to conceive of change and hope originating elsewhere. Faced with the inability of hope deployed by the state to resonate with and make a material difference in their lives, those on the socio-economic and political margins develop their own forms of political hope. Grounded in their experiences, this hope is shaped by their daily struggles and focuses on creating practical alternatives that address their needs with the means they have. This transition in the source of hope signifies a wider disenchantment with institutional frameworks.

Like everyone else, however, Mdala knows that when Slovo is upgraded to a Township with paved roads, brick houses, permanent electricity, and a sewage system, all existing structures will most likely be demolished to make way for the new layout. When Slovo is demolished and rebuilt, he will also receive government-subsidized housing. In a sense, the examples do not only highlight the contrasting approaches and orientations to change and who will bring it about but ultimately reveal two forms of political hope: one about hope vested in the state coming up against its own limits and another in which hope shifts to become something people have to make for themselves rooted in their lived experiences and capacities.

However, the examples also share a common thread. In conversations with other residents, the phrase 'being tired of hope' keeps coming up in various iterations, and the choice of words strikes me. Instead of using terms like hopelessness, loss of hope, or past hope, most of the people I talk to choose 'tired' to describe their relationship with hope. By making this distinction, residents portray hope as a burden, a constant companion for so long that they're overly familiar with it, it's worn out, and they're tired of it. At the same time, the use of fatigue rather than the absence of hope implies that...

'...[t]o give up hope would be to accept that a desired future is not possible. [...] Being hopeful may be necessary for something to stay possible, but it is not sufficient grounds for the determination of the future' (Ahmed 2014: 185).

Essentially, a life without hope may simply seem impossible to the Slovo Park residents. Hope is deeply tied to the broader historical and political narratives of post-apartheid South Africa, where the state, emerging from the struggle against apartheid, positioned itself as the architect of progress and inclusion. The promises of housing, land redistribution, and economic upliftment were integral to the liberation project, forming the chore of state-sponsored hope that continues to sustain it. Yet, as these promises remain largely unmet, hope becomes a site of tension fueling discontent. Phelelani's experience exemplifies how hope transcends the immediate actions of the government; it is not just something imposed by the state but a relational force that binds individuals, communities, and the government to a shared, if increasingly fragile, vision of a better future. Even as faith in political leadership diminishes, the expectation of transformation persists, illustrating how hope continues to function as both a means of endurance and a demand for justice.

Even if hope provides the motivation and belief in the possibility of change, it is not enough to bring about the desired change (ibid.: 184). This understanding sheds light on a setting where hope can be a source of resilience, a weighty reminder of unmet expectations, and a constraint. For Phelelani and other residents, hope becomes a lingering expectation that runs too deep to give up and a source of exhaustion because it is continuously imposed by the state in the form of promises and rhetoric from government officials, while incremental changes in residents' lives to sustain hope are consistently blocked—at times by the state itself—leaving them with no avenue for action.

### **Betting on the Future**

In the tapestry of South Africa's history and post-apartheid nation-building, hope emerges as a persistent thread weaving through the intricate layers of adversity during the apartheid years, the triumph of 1994, and ongoing

economic struggles, political tensions, governance controversies, social unrest, and energy challenges. Over time, hope has taken on various roles and acquired different meanings as a historical symbol, in political rhetoric, and through the confrontation with everyday lived experience.

Juxtaposing the historical trajectory of hope in South Africa's political discourse with the lived experiences of marginalized communities reveals the interplay between hope, crisis, national identity, and the state. Once a driving force in the anti-apartheid struggle, hope became a cornerstone of South Africa's democratic transition and global identity. During apartheid, it served as both a political rallying cry and a source of resilience, motivating individuals and communities to envision and actively pursue a better future despite overwhelming obstacles. Initially embodied by key leaders, hope was later projected onto the nation-state, reinforcing South Africa's image as a symbol of transformation, and more recently, Ramaphosa has framed it as an integral feature of national identity. However, as hope became institutionalized, its fulfillment shifted to government structures, leading to widespread disillusionment when progress stalled or promises remained unmet.

The tension between promise and ongoing letdown is particularly evident in places like Slovo Park, where systemic inequalities and persistent crises shape daily life. Here, state-sponsored hope is no longer an unquestioned source of inspiration but a burden—marked by disappointment, fatigue, and complicity—that serves as a constant reminder of deferred dreams and an inescapable cycle of waiting. Expressed in the recurring phrase 'tired of hope,' this sentiment challenges the simplistic notion of a hope–hopelessness binary, revealing the resilience required to sustain hope even as it becomes exhausting. This exhaustion with state-sponsored hope in communities like Slovo Park reflects a broader national struggle in which hope remains deeply intertwined with the core promises of the liberation struggle.

In South Africa, hope is inextricably linked to the nation's historical trajectory and the aspirations for the post-apartheid era. It has long been central to the country's socio-political order, driving real change and fostering a deep-rooted belief in its transformative potential. However, as present disappointments are measured against hope's past ability to effect meaningful change—and as life without this defining hope remains unimaginable—disillusionment grows more acute. The contrast between past achievements and persistently unmet promises has left many grappling with the weight of unfulfilled expectations, forcing them to renegotiate their relationship with hope and its connection to the state. While hope can inspire resilience and transformation, it can also act as a pacifier, anchoring individuals in an unchanging present as they wait for a better future. By focusing on distant improvements, people may become more tolerant of harmful current conditions rather than working to transform them, aligning with Lauren Berlant's (2011) concept of *cruel optimism*, where the belief in a brighter future sustains the very structures that perpetuate harm. In this way, hope operates as a double-edged force: it has the power to drive progress

but can also trap people in cycles of endurance and inaction, reinforcing the very status quo they seek to escape.

In response to the ongoing friction between hope as a catalyst for transformation and a mechanism of stagnation, residents navigate state-sponsored hope in two ways. For some, abandoning this hope altogether seems impossible, as it remains deeply embedded in their historical and political reality despite unfulfilled promises and growing disillusionment. To relinquish it would mean giving up on broader aspirations of progress, inclusion, housing, land redistribution, and economic uplift—goals too integral to simply forsake. Rather than embracing hopelessness, they describe being *tired* of hope, seeing it as both a necessary force for envisioning change and an exhausting burden continuously reinforced by state rhetoric yet obstructed by systemic inaction. For others, disillusionment with the government's ability to effect change has led them to withdraw their hopes from it entirely, at least for now. No longer trusting government institutions, they instead cultivate their own sources of political hope—rooted in their lived experiences and aimed at generating tangible alternatives that work for them. This shift from imposed unproductive hope to one aligned with everyday struggles is itself a political act, reflecting a broader rejection of institutional structures. By resisting and redefining state-driven hope, individuals transform it into a tool for resilience and self-determination, reimagining its role beyond government assurances.

As South Africa continues to navigate its path forward, President Ramaphosa's assertion that hope remains a fundamental force—one that is constantly shifting and often shines a light on its own fragility—holds weight. Yet, a paradox emerges when the nation is defined through the lens of hope, even as the state obstructs and undermines it. This contradiction or friction forces individuals to disentangle their identity as South Africans from the state's inability to fulfill national aspirations, prompting the question of, if not the state, who or what should be responsible for realizing these ideals. Building on Lauren Berlant's conceptualization of hope as both transformative and entrapping (2011) and Sara Ahmed's argument that abandoning hope means surrendering the possibility of a better future (2014: 185), this article argues that hope in South Africa is both a necessity and a constraint. In a context where the gap between government promises and lived realities continues to widen, hope remains vital for sustaining belief in progress, yet it also becomes a burden as individuals grapple with the tension between their aspirations and the state's failures. The article introduces a perspective on the pragmatic reorientation of hope—shifting away from the empty promises of the government and toward tangible, community-driven action. In doing so, people do not abandon hope but instead redirect and ground it in more sustainable and actionable forms. By reclaiming agency and redefining what it means to hope amid systemic failure, people are transforming hope into a collective, resilient force that reflects its enduring significance and forges pathways toward progress independent of state limitations.



1. Formerly known as Nancefield settlement, it was renamed in 1995 after the death of anti-apartheid activist and housing minister Joe Slovo.
2. While social movements play a critical role in shaping and mobilizing hope as a political force, a detailed examination of their strategies and impact falls beyond the scope of this paper. However, in the context of disillusionment, movements such as Abahlali baseMjondolo in Durban have emerged as key actors in a politics of hope, steadfastly advocating for land, dignity, housing rights, and a future free of oppression, poverty, and displacement. It could be argued that the hope mobilized by these movements functions analogous to the state-sanctioned version, yet it is firmly embedded in the experiences of the residents and their tangible struggles. Rather than focusing on hope in the context of more organized activism, this article draws from the experiences of Slovo Park residents in constructing a distinct political affect that is shaped by their lived experiences and also responds to the shortcomings and contradictions of governance.
3. Although the term 'Black' does not capture the full complexity of these groups, it is used here as an umbrella term for Zulu, Xhosa, Bapedi, Ndebele, Basotho, Venda, Tsonga, Swazi, and BaTswana.
4. I acknowledge that not only these racialized groups of people were repressed.
5. This slogan originated within the Palestinian struggle for liberation and resistance against Israeli occupation.
6. RDP is a shorthand expression for subsidized housing. Under the *Reconstruction and Development Programme* (RDP) the qualifying beneficiaries receive a fully constructed house at no cost from the Government.

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### **Author's Bio**

Eileen Jahn is a Junior Fellow at the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS) and a Research Associate at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology (Chair of Epistemologies of the Global South) at the University of Bayreuth, Germany. Her research examines the lived experiences of underserved urban residents in South Africa, focusing on the electricity crisis, unfulfilled promises of the post-apartheid transition, conceptualizations of political power, and decolonial imaginaries of socio-political transformation. She holds an M.Sc. in Social Sciences from the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and is an active member of the Anthropology of Global Inequalities working group.

Address: Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Chair of Epistemologies of the Global South, University of Bayreuth, Building Zapf Haus 2, Nürnberger Straße 38, D-95448 Bayreuth

Email: [eileen.jahn@uni-bayreuth.de](mailto:eileen.jahn@uni-bayreuth.de)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8948-3481>