

Date: Wednesday, 30 July 2025

Time: 14:00-15:30

Venue: Zoom

Format: Online Dialogue

Background and Rationale

South Africa's political and social landscape is increasingly marked by division across generational, ideological, racial, and economic lines. Whether in Parliament, on university campuses, or on digital platforms, the tone of public discourse has become more adversarial, making meaningful dialogue difficult. This heightened polarisation presents a significant challenge at a time when the country is grappling with complex issues such as inequality, democratic fragility, and the shrinking of civic space. The current environment undermines the principles of active citizenship, inclusive dialogue, empathetic engagement, and collaborative problem-solving that are vital for a healthy democracy.

Polarisation can be broadly understood as the division of society into opposing camps based on differing belief systems and perspectives. Although definitions vary, recent theoretical contributions—such as those by Mark Freeman (2023)—offer greater clarity. Freeman defines polarisation as a “prominent division or conflict that forms between major groups in a society or political system and that is marked by the clustering and radicalization of views and beliefs at two distant and antagonistic poles” (2023:6). In the South African context, historical and ongoing socio-economic inequalities, combined with political contestation and identity-based tensions, have entrenched polarisation. These divisions are increasingly driven by factors such as class disparities, racial dynamics, economic exclusion, and ideological fragmentation.

In response to this growing polarisation, the Cool Politics Café seeks to bring together diverse voices—across generations, ideologies, and backgrounds—to engage in honest, reflective, and constructive conversations. Grounded in the belief that democratic resilience depends on the ability to dialogue across differences, the Café offers a platform where participants can explore alternative futures through mutual understanding rather than conflict.

The theme of the upcoming Cool Politics Café will focus on key polarising issues identified through a preliminary survey of academics, civil society organisations, and young people. The event will examine how polarisation is manifesting in South Africa today and explore the nature and dynamics of the debates surrounding these contentious themes. Through critical analysis and facilitated discussion, the Café will develop practical recommendations aimed at fostering greater social cohesion, solidarity, and democratic engagement.

Aims and Objectives

- To foster open and inclusive dialogue on the nature and impact of polarisation in South Africa.
- Develop a shared meaning and understanding of polarisation in South Africa.
- To amplify intergenerational perspectives on polarization in South Africa.
- To explore strategies for strengthening social cohesion.

Target Audience

- Youths from all walks of life
- General public – diverse ages
- Civil society organisations

Event Format: Intergenerational Dialogue

The event will be hosted online. The programme will include:

- Opening reflections by our moderator to frame the discussion.
- Panel dialogue featuring 4 speakers from diverse backgrounds (e.g., politics, academia, youth movements, cultural, sports or arts sector, and civil society)
- Live Q and A speakers ask each other questions
- Interaction between speakers and participants, Q & A on chats and open mic segment
- Closing remarks and a summary of key themes and action points.